

Hands joined, they walked through the expensively furnished house and out the back door.

The swimming pool was filled but held no swimmers. High school students milled about the yard in couples and in groups. Music sounded from a speaker attached to the house, conveying soft recordings from within.

Claudia and Mark paused on the rim of all the activity.

"Very nice," he said. "Quite a lot of fuss for a casual party."

"Anything worth doing is worth doing well." She pressed his hand.

"Nice anyway. Thank you."

"You're welcome, Sir," she kidded. Her eyes glanced past a scattering of youngsters to rest on John Corbin. She was busy talking to three boys and a girl and gesturing dramatically.

Claudia nudged Mark. "Just look at our child, but she's lovely—lovely and lively. She's charming. Mark. She's like she was and like she was maybe."

"Thank goodness," he agreed. Even now, she was after his daughter's despondency, relief edged words.

Mark felt Claudia's smile go wide as she looked at Judy. He felt warm and comfortable and safe of it.

Of all Claudia's qualities, Mark found her enthusiasm for his child, and the sincerity the greatest portion of her charm.

He glanced away from the direction of her eyes and from his daughter. Far to the side from the others, he saw Lithe Sutton.

She was strangely quiet amidst all the chatter. The dark boy standing next to her

THE SUN AND THE SAND

They waded toward shore, Lithe moving gracefully ahead of him, her wet hair hanging down the middle of her tanned back. Suddenly she turned to smile and reach back for his hand and Mark experienced a wave of total happiness. All at once, it no longer mattered that she was only seventeen, or that she was his daughter's best friend, or that there were laws forbidding what was racing through his mind as he followed her up on the beach.

She stood facing him, droplets of water glistening on her wondrously taut body. He was aware that he was staring but he couldn't disguise the complete awe he felt for the youthful perfection of her. Her halter had slipped, its water heaviness making her firm breasts wickedly visible and prominent; the diaper-sized loin cloth was plastered to the supple curves of her feminine torso like a second skin. The effect was one of near-nakedness and he could feel his blood heating rapidly.

"I want you," he said hoarsely, barely conscious of having spoken.

Lithe smiled, her eyes narrowing. "I know."

"It's wrong . . . crazy . . ." He knew he was trembling with the strain of containing the steaming, thrashing thing within him. "Lithe . . ." he muttered helplessly.

Her eyes ordered him to wait, to be silent. He watched her peel off the halter, causing her rampant breasts to tumble free. She pushed at the wet bottom, wiggling, and let it fall to the sand. "Now you," she smiled, stretching her pliant body taut for his benefit. "I want to see you. Then we'll make love."

id, "I don't think so. This isn't the first time this has happened, Claudia. Whenever Lithe isn't in the picture, Judy seems to be without interest. I'm afraid of the influence Lithe has over her. I'm really afraid of it, Claudia. When Lithe's around there are no problems. Judy couldn't be better. When she's not, all . . ."

Claudia cocked her head to one side and breathed deeply, causing her breasts to rise and smooth the material of her gown. "As I recall, seventeen is difficult age. I'm sure that's all it is for Judy."

He picked up his glass and drained it. He looked at Claudia a moment, then turned away. "If Judy were under the influence of most any other girl, I would be concerned. But Lithe Sutton is a world apart from Jude—in every way."

Claudia nodded. "I know what's troubling you, Mark. I've heard some things." She paused, gave a little laugh and continued. "A woman can't operate three beauty salons as I do without picking up bits of gossip, you know."

"I know. What have you heard?"

"That Lithe is promiscuous. On the other hand, there are a lot of girls. And Lithe has an excuse—she's had a miserable life. The father deserted her mother when she was small, then the mother took on a variety of new husbands, none of whom lasted. So, if you're liberal I think you are, Mark, you can't be too severe with the Lithe Suttons of the world."

"I don't mean to be," he said. "It's just that Lithe worries me. As an example, at your party the other night—well, I came across her and a boy in the back of your lot. They were being pretty damn intimate, to say the least. Sex means too much to this girl."

"Darling, you don't understand a thing about women," Claudia said, laughing lightly. "Most girls



it within the familiarity of her body—there was a fragmentation of memory that remained remote from the present—from the growing action upon his body. It was for a more youthful body—his own—unspent, unexplored, unfulfilled in youthful games of love. And he felt remorse for all that had been missed, knowing that no extent of mature love would recapture for him the seconds of youth that had left him two decades earlier.

When Claudia's head buried closer to his body, raised, then lowered again in a new action of love, the fragmentation of memory broke and chipped into the present in a quick image-extension of the young and seductive, Lithe Sutton.

Mark rejected the image. He pulled at Claudia's head, raising her to him. But when he moved to turn her to her side, she restrained him.

"No, let me," she gasped. "Let me—let me love you, arling."

His body obeyed her words. He lowered to his back as Claudia clung to him.

He knew a moment of displeasure for Claudia's dominance. Just before she came to him he felt unhappiness and the impulse to reverse their positions, bring her beneath him to meet the fury of his lashing body.

But, within an instant, there was no unhappiness, no desire for reversal. All feeling left him except that provided by the fast moving action of Claudia.

He joined the movement, sending her higher and higher above him, until there was no more reaching, only the final, thudding slaps of their bodies as they crashed, found their climax, exploded, then let their bodies collapse and relax together, their skin mixing, soft and wet.

Much later, as Mark drove home, he remembered

HIS DAUGHTER'S FRIEND

by

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An Original Novel

A MIDWOOD BOOK

to get ready to celebrate. The boys are probably waiting for us now."

"All right," Judy agreed. She started to leave, then turned back to her friend. "Lithe—are you sure Pete really wants to go out with me."

"Of course," Lithe said. "Why do you even wonder?"

"Because he used to date you—maybe he still wants to."

"Don't be silly. Pete and I did date but not seriously. And he did ask you, didn't he?"

"Yes. But I wondered about it. I don't know Pete as well as the other boys in class. It seemed odd that he'd suddenly ask me for a date." She paused again, then said, "He's not—well, he isn't—you know what I mean, Lithe."

"I do. And Pete isn't that way. At least I don't think

"Good."

Lithe looked at her closely for a moment, then said, "Does it really bother you so much?"

"What?"

"Sex."

"No." Her voice was muffled and her eyes lowered to the dusty stage floor.

"Well, you can't blame me for still wondering," Lithe said, smiling knowledgeably. "After the other night—well—"

Judy raised her eyes. "We—well, I think we agree that we were both moved by some—some force, maybe our friendship—otherwise, we wouldn't have done what we did. It seemed like I just couldn't do anything that might displease you, Lithe."

Lithe laughed. "Don't exaggerate and don't worry," she said, "If anything, I

HIS DAUGHTER'S FRIEND

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She took a step toward Mark and reached for his hand again. He took it. She put one foot on the deck rail, balanced a moment, then released his hand and jumped into the water.

Mark watched her submerge completely in the waist-deep water. Then he leaped over the side of the

aised out of the water as Mark entered it. : was next to her they joined hands and ward the shore. As they came onto the beach t a wave of happiness sweep him. And it was ppiness, one that had no hint of complaint f t because the present offered so much. I d and looked at Lithe. Her halter had slipp ter heaviness bringing her nipples into t dark brown, hard, and passion pointed. And loth bottom of the suit had receded, too, cau dip even lower and hang loose and slig ed.

Mark felt the wetness of his own shorts and : they, like Lithe's suit, had become soggy ealing.

Lithe's hand tightened in Mark's as if she bduing pain or great pleasure, containing it rstring release. Mark swung her hand f oving her ahead of him. Their hands separa oved forward another few steps then turn ooked at him.

Mark halted. Years dwindled, became then seconds, then the very instant that th And the instant had been created for the himself and the young girl before him.

'She smiled slowly, then it faded and her became almost fearful. But Mark knew th fear caused by desire, a fear, self-made and

Chapter One

The high school auditorium was dark. But a small slice of hall light split through the darkness and reached for the greater brightness of the stage as Mark Corbin opened the door and stepped inside.

The stage was empty, yet there was a sense of action and life upon it. Mark smiled and moved his big frame down the center aisle. When he reached the orchestra pit a girl suddenly appeared from the wing. He stopped and squinted upward and against the overhead lights. At first his unadjusted eyes caught only the dark outline of the girl's body. But in a moment, all of her features became clear and he knew the girl was Lithe Sutton, his daughter's new friend.

She looked down at him but said nothing. There was the quick shuffle of her ballet slippers as she hurried down the stage steps. This sudden movement brought a light bouncing vitality to her dark sweater where only a moment before it had been soft and still.

She stopped in front of Mark, smiled, then said in a low, misty tone, "You must be Judy's father."

"Right. And you have to be Lithe."

She moved a step closer. "Yes, I am. But how could you possibly know?"

"What does she have to do with this? With anything—well, anything that you and I might—"

"I told her," Lithe interrupted.

"Told her?" Mark shouted, fear thickening the words.

"Yes. I told her that I was going downtown today and that I was going to try and get you to give me a ride home."

"Oh," Mark said with visible relief.

His smile broke more widely. "You surely didn't tell I told Jude about us? About us on the beach, about our love, did you?"

"I wondered," Mark said. His relief was only momentary, for the word "love" as spoken by Lithe rang hard in his mind, causing new concern.

"After all," Lithe continued, "Judy's my friend, I wouldn't want her to—well, to get upset—to maybe even get sick again because of our love affair."

Again, the word struck Mark sharply.

"So, where will we have cocktails, darling?" Lithe asked.

Resignedly, Mark said, "I'll find a place."

He went to the closet for his coat and hat. He spent his time there, delaying their departure, it seemed for some unknown but rightful cause. He considered quickly a dark mood had come to him. It was realized, a mood of the same texture and making that had held him the entire week-end: that had held him the very moment that followed his wild, seeking conquest of the seventeen-year-old girl on the sandy, desolate beach.

Mark stepped back from the closet and found the girl.

"Ready?" she asked.

"As ready as possible," he replied.

"Quite simple," he said. "Judy's made you the main topic of conversation around the house since you moved to town. And, I guess I'd know anyway."

"Really?"

"Yes. There aren't too many platinum-haired girls in our little city."

"I guess not," she agreed. Her smile widened and Mark wondered how such gross sensuality could show so early in a teenage girl. Then his eyes lowered and he found new wonderment in the fully mature breasts that jutted against the soft material of her sweater.

When his eyes returned to her face, he said, "Where is Judy, by the way?"

"Dressing," Lithe replied. "We're the only ones here. The rest of the cast left about fifteen minutes ago. We're late, but you know Judy."

"Indeed I do."

"Well, she won't be long now." Lithe paused and glanced inquisitively into Mark's deeply tanned face.

At a moment, she let her eyes lower and impatiently touch at all of his body.

Her eyes checked their movement when they reached his narrow waist. She raised them quickly and said, "It was good of your fiancée to offer refreshments for the cast."

"My fiancée?" His eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Yes. At least that's how Judy interpreted it."

"Oh," Mark said. He felt the familiar stir of satisfaction whenever there was a sign of daughter-approval for Claudia Rant.

When Mark did not say more, Lithe's smile faded a bit and she asked, "Did I say something wrong?"

"No. Of course not," Mark said. "I was just thinking that Judy sometimes gets a bit ahead of herself."

"You mean you're not going to marry Claudia?"

Suddenly, Mark felt embarrassed. "Let's say that

appeared at the bar, waiting for their order. Mark did, feeling as if he had been caught in the midst of a crime.

He smiled at the waitress but before he could speak, Lithe said, "I'll have a martini, darling. Double, and very dry, please."

"Oh—oh, of course," he said, suddenly befuddled.

"And you, Mister Corbin?" the waitress inquired.

"A martini sounds fine," he replied. "And the same way." He wondered why he had ordered it. He loathed martinis. Yet, he had felt the need to duplicate Lithe's request in order to reduce the effect—suspicion—of underaged drinking.

The waitress hurried away. Lithe looked around again and reached to retake Mark's hand. But he quickly diverted the contact by lighting a cigarette.

"May I have one of those?" Lithe asked.

"Oh, certainly." He extended the package to her then lighted the white tip she pursed forward.

"Thank you." She raised her hand in a gesture that took in all of the large room. "It's very exciting here. Everyone here—the manager, the waitress—they know you. And they didn't even question my age when we ordered."

"No, they didn't," Mark agreed. "However, they're breaking the law and so am I."

"Oh, bosh. Don't be silly. They'd never refuse to serve me as long as I'm with you."

Mark did not answer. The waitress brought two drinks, placed them on the table, then departed.

Lithe smiled over the rim of her glass as she sipped the cocktail. Mark gulped at his, still hating it but at least anxious for the relaxation it was bringing.

A quietness settled about Lithe, and Mark perceived it as it had come to her upon the crisis.

we're talking about some pretty serious thing—at least while you kids are waiting to be fed."

Lithe sparkled a laugh. "Yes. Do you want me to hurry Judy along?"

"Please. If you could."

When she turned and started to walk away, Mark said, "Lithe—just a minute."

She turned and faced him again.

"Lithe, I want you to know how much your friendship has meant to Judy. To me, too. To all of us."

Her eyes lowered. An expression of shyness came to her face. "I like Judy very much. We get along very well, Mister Corbin."

"I know. And I'm delighted. Until you moved to town—well, from the time of my wife's death, Judy was in pretty much of a shell. She seemed to lose interest in everything. She never smiled, wasn't active in school—she was a little ghost until she met you, Lithe. I just wanted you to know. I want you to know that I'm grateful—very grateful."

Lithe raised her eyes. For a moment, Mark thought he saw sadness there but when she spoke he knew that it had only been attentiveness.

"You're very interesting," she said suddenly.

Her words seemed very personal and irrelevant to the things Mark had wanted to convey. Again, he felt embarrassment.

"And it must have been very difficult for you," Lithe continued. "It must still be difficult—to be alone, I mean."

"We all adjust to things," he said.

"I presume so." Her tone was mature and Mark thought how very quickly she seemed to change from girl to woman, as if she could assume either role at will. He felt an urge to talk more about the circum-

as he seated himself behind the desk and began
erding papers together.

Is there a—a powder room here?" she asked softly.
Yes. Right across the corridor. It's for the secre
ies."

"I'll be only a moment." She turned and hurrie
at of the room.

He investigated a few more papers then shov
hem into his briefcase. He lingered over one fol
reading the entire first page before closing it
putting it with the others.

He still felt the burn of embarrassment and a
caused first by Baxton, his client, then Henry
cocktail lounge manager. Its force was made str
because there was no one to blame but himse
could have prevented an entanglement with the
tiful teenaged girl. And that there was
tangement, he had little doubt. Until the r
Lithe had appeared at his office door, he had
ered the event of their lovemaking singular
ted. An event of great pleasure, even if fo
out still something that would not be repe
was less sure of it now. Even, less sure of himse

He had just zipped the briefcase shut
heard the washroom door open and close ag
was a moment's silence and he wondered
not hear the movement of Lithe's ap
looked up from the desk and had his answe

Lithe curved herself in a seductive pose
door. She was nude except for the stol
shoulders.

The shock that Mark felt was as muc
den, masculine reaction as it was for the
her disrobement, the sight of the beauti
that had so recently been his to move, t
and twist in heated response to his care:

stances of his wife's death—about its effect upon himself and his daughter. He wondered about it, questioned why such deep conversation should be prompted by a seventeen-year-old girl. He decided that it was the quality of the girl herself that created such a temptation. She had the ability of instant rapport—with himself and probably with anyone she met. She had the ability of reaching a variety of levels, any such level of understanding that was needed to create a feeling of sameness.

But Mark did not offer the girl a new plateau of communication. He smiled and remained silent as the temptation passed.

"I'll get Judy," Lithe said. She turned and quickly bounded up the stage steps. Her hips, tight in black stretch pants, bounced in sensual accompaniment to the free, almost wild movement of her breasts.

Mark watched her hurry across the stage and disappear. He turned and looked back at the darkened auditorium. For a moment he stared at the rows of empty seats, not thinking about the slight apprehension that stirred within his chest. When he turned to again look at the stage, his apprehension settled, and he knew for certain what had caused it.

Lithe Sutton, his daughter's new and different friend.

She was not as he had pictured her. But he remembered that he had seldom during his thirty-eight years created correct images of people. They were always more—or less—than he had expected.

He knew that Lithe was more than he had anticipated. But in what way? She was as beautiful and mature as his daughter's raving description. Mark smiled slightly, realizing that it was this that had also been responsible for his slight feeling of apprehension. It had come to him because Lithe was all

Like a giant, drowning wave, great sadness swept over Lithe and it seemed to her that it was caused by envy for Judy Corbin, for the uncorruptableness of her grip on love's first gift.

She banished the thought and with it some of the sadness left her. But the envy remained. It could not be denied. Only the status of what she envied could be changed. Lithe's thoughts centered upon this possibility as she smiled sweetly and walked toward her friend.

that he had been led to believe she was. Yet, at the same time, she was as different as he could expect. The feeling left him as Judy and Lithe appeared, laughing and hurrying in young-girl fashion across the stage.

Somewhat surprised, he noticed that his daughter's body was every bit as mature as that of her friend. He noticed, too, that Lithe's beauty seemed to enhance and brighten Judy's dark, natural beauty.

Judy waved to her father. "Hi, Dad. Did I keep you waiting?"

"Don't you always?" Mark called back.

She giggled merrily as Lithe Sutton directed a wide smile in Mark's direction.

In a moment both girls stood before him.

Judy stepped forward, reached up and gave her father a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Thank you. But what's that for?" Mark asked, smiling and pleased with this type of greeting.

"Because I haven't seen you in over twenty-four hours. I never see you anymore."

Mark nodded and his expression darkened a bit. "I'm sorry, Jude. I was very late last night. I've been pretty tied up lately."

"I know," Judy said seriously. Then she brightened and said, "How's the bad-kid project going?"

"Very well," Mark said. "And stop calling it that."

Lithe looked up at Mark, her eyes questioning.

Mark turned to her and smiled. "My advertising agency is doing a public service job on juvenile delinquency. It's kept me very busy."

"Oh, how interesting," Lithe said brightly.

"Pop's researched the project by living with —" Judy giggled.

Mark and Lithe laughed together and in —
Judy added her own trill of gaiety to their —

Like a giant, drowning wave, great sadness swept over Lithe and it seemed to her that it was caused by envy for Judy Corbin, for the uncorruptableness of her grip on love's first gift.

She banished the thought and with it some of the sadness left her. But the envy remained. It could not be denied. Only the status of what she envied could be changed. Lithe's thoughts centered upon this possibility as she smiled sweetly and walked toward her friend.

When they had quieted, Mark said, "All right, you kids. We'd better leave. Claudia's waiting for us."

"Correct, Father, I'm starved," Judy added.

The three of them walked down the darkened aisle. When they let the school door slam shut behind them they paused, each feeling and welcoming the light touch of the early spring breeze. Then, Mark led them to his car in the parking lot. Lithe slid into the front seat and Judy followed her. Then he settled behind the wheel, gunned the motor and headed in the direction of Claudia Rant's house.

He heard, without full mental acknowledgment, phrases, sentences, little gasps and giggles, and the general schoolgirl chatter of the girls beside him. The hum of their voices was a pleasant sound to Mark Corbin. For him it represented his daughter's journey from shock and despair to regained happiness.

Centered within Mark's frequent mental wanderings was the one memory that was more sad, more pitiful, than even the tragic moment of his wife's death. It was the quietness of Judy that followed. Her constant sadness and loss of vitality. Because she had been ill a long time, he had thought Judy would be ready for the end, even as he had become ready. But it was not so. Shock, made stronger by illness, shook the girl to black depression. For Mark, adjustment came quickly as he faced the new, dual-parent role. He ground himself to the task of caring for his daughter and to the development of his new advertising agency. Sorrow subsided.

Judy, however, had resisted the steady pull back to normalcy. And she had resisted it for two years while unhappiness webbed into her personality like permanent gray threads of despair. It ended when she met Lithe Sutton. Judy came out of her cocoon of

The elevator slowed, then stopped. The door parted.

"Good-night, Miss." The operator grinned as Lithe stepped into the corridor.

"Good-night. And thank you," she answered.

She waited as the doors snapped shut behind her. Then she walked down the long corridor and stopped in front of Mark's office. She patted at her hair, opened her bag and made a quick investigation of her make-up with a small, jeweled mirror. She smiled again, thinking how very soon her face would be scrubbed clear of it, unmasked and free, as naked as her body and as ready for love.

Lithe pushed open the door. The reception room was dark but there was light from Mark's portion of the office. She waited a moment, then moved toward it.

He was behind his desk. His forehead was deeply creased with lines Lithe had never noticed before. His face seemed as dark as the wood of his desk and Lithe wondered if it was only that way because of the odd light reflections in the room. But when he spoke she knew that the darkness about him was real, as real as the anger in his voice.

"Sit down, Lithe," he said. "I want to talk to you."

She did not answer nor did she move for a moment. Something in his voice frightened her, shook her confidence and made her feel unsure of herself, unsure of trusting her body to move or her voice to speak. She waited, gaining composure, trying to divine the cause of Mark's black mood.

"Well, come on. Sit down," he said. He stood but did not move from behind his desk. He motioned to a chair that sat to one side.

Lithe waited, then finally gave a little laugh.

sorrow. Bubbling interest in life returned to her. She had again found girlhood's happy present. And Mark felt gratitude for Lithe's healthy influence on the life of his daughter.

A shriek of delight erupted from Judy. There was the softer laugh from Lithe Sutton. Mark smiled. The smile faded as quickly as it had appeared.

He felt the warm, deliberate pressure of Lithe's knee against his thigh. He ignored it, assuming that it had occurred as a result of the car's last turn. But it persisted, then grew stronger.

Mark's smile returned and he gave full attention to his daughter's hurried words, thinking that Lithe, like a silent conspirator, was signaling him to give attention to some remark Judy was about to make. But there was nothing but the usual gay chatter.

The pressure continued against his thigh. For a moment he considered shifting his position. But he did not. Such a gesture would seem rude and unwarranted. And, it would be an acknowledgment of the light, sexual communication.

When he made the final turn at the end of the road that led to Claudia's house, Lithe's knee withdrew. But it was replaced by a new form of communication. She leaned toward him and her breast nuzzled against his forearm. Mark could feel the heat of it pressuring through his suit to claim his skin as embracingly as if their bare skin had met. He listened to the rambling conversation of his daughter. It seemed unreal that Judy should be jabbering to her friend while the friend's breast made sharp indentations into his arm.

Lithe was silent but Mark sensed an increased breathing from her as her breast seemed to burrow closer. He did not remove his arm from the girl's touch until he pulled the car into Claudia's

Chapter Thirteen

Lithe Sutton, wearing nothing but a short robe, stood at the large picture window of her home and looked out from the parted draperies. Restlessly, she tapped one bare foot on the thick carpet, then she slowed the motion and dug her toes into the tufted material, grabbing at it in an angry, frustrated action. She looked at the long driveway that curved completely around the rear of the house. Her breathing increased when her mother's car came into view from the rear and swept downward toward the street. Her foot began its frantic tapping again as she followed the figure of her mother, prim and youthful-looking behind the steering wheel. Lithe watched as the car pulled onto the street, turned, then shot out of sight. Then she pushed the draperies together in an abrupt, mad gesture that seemed meant to shut out the sight of the late afternoon, the car, her mother—everything.

Lithe walked away from the window and stopped in the center of the living room. For a moment she was very quiet, then she began pacing back and forth. She tried to remember her mother's exact words, uttered less than an hour earlier. They did not come to

Then his arm rolled away from the warm breast as he turned the steering wheel. Her impudent body was gone. It was as if there had never been any contact.

Floodlights brightened half of the two acres in back of Claudia's house. Mark heard the party noises and sensed the movement of young people behind the high, picket fence.

He braked the car and turned to the girls beside him. "Better get in there before the food's gone."

Judy threw open the door and slid from her seat. More slowly, Lithe followed her. Before she slammed the door shut she smiled at Mark and asked, "Aren't you coming in?"

"Oh, yes. I'll be along in a minute."

All right. I'll see you inside," Lithe said. There a hint of possessiveness in her voice.

Mark remained in the car. He watched the girls fly into the house and lit a cigarette. He thought in how different Lithe Sutton was from his daughter and most of the young people he knew. He could now understand why Lithe had appealed to his daughter and helped so much in her recovery. Again, he felt grateful that the platinum-haired girl had become a part of his daughter's life. He crushed out cigarette in the dashboard ashtray and opened the door.

Claudia Rant met him at the front steps. Mark stood in tribute to her radiance. He admired the push of her breasts against a low-cut, yellow dress, asking how much younger she looked than her 27 years.

Hi, darling," she greeted. "What's the matter? Did you fail to face the young people and realize how much you're aging?"

Afraid to face you and know how beautiful you are," he said.

he had not yet told Judy about her father's situation with her—about the sexual claim he had first established at the cottage while Judy was doing housework. It was something to save, Lithe thought. Something that tortured Mark every single day.

Midway through the fourth ring, Mark answered in a gruff, and Lithe thought, somewhat tired voice.

She made no response. She wished she could. She wished that she could shout of the things that were happening—the horrible things that were about to happen to his daughter. But she could not. She would have to be satisfied with his voice, saying "hello," over and over again, seeking an answer from the unknown caller.

Suddenly, she found a new thrill. Dramatically, she held the phone receiver far out and in the direction of the open door in a cruel gift of terror to Mark, who could never know.

She listened one last time to his voice, tried to embed its sound within her for future misty hours review, then quickly put the receiver down. Then she snatched up her glass and swallowed another full ounce of its contents. She waited a moment, then taking the glass with her she walked again to the top of the stairs.

She looked down at the curve of stairs, at the way they ended at the foyer which in turn opened into the living room. Her senses grew keener as she heard a slight cry of anger from Judy and a rough exclamation from Pete. Carefully, she moved back down the stairs and paused. She heard Judy again, then again. It was silent for a moment, then there was the sound of mad scuffling, then fighting, then another cry, loud and horror

Lithe's breathing restricted, caught, then heavy. Hurrying, but quietly, she moved to

She came to him and he took her lightly in his arms. Her hazel eyes smiled up at him the instant before her lips parted for his kiss.

They separated. Claudia patted at her blonde curls then slid her hand beneath Mark's arm and cuddled herself to him.

"I've missed you," she purred.

"And I, you," he answered.

"I'm beginning to feel neglected. You're always at the office, it seems."

"Judy was saying the same thing—reminding me that it's been twenty-four hours since I last saw her."

"We're both neglected women," she sighed. "Is this juvenile thing so bad?"

"Not bad," he answered seriously. "Just important—so damn important."

"It is indeed. Your first big public service account."

He turned to her, "That's not what I mean. It's important because I have a chance to do something really worthwhile. I bet that sounds pretty trite, doesn't it?"

"Not at all, darling. I know how you feel about it. I'm glad you do."

"I can't help it. This is the first time I've ever felt that I had a bigger place in the business than just selling soap or hand cream. Now, I know I have. If our campaign is right—and I'm going to make it right—we can cut down on school drop outs and make kids start to think differently."

She rubbed herself closer to him. "You feel good when you talk like that."

He laughed. "Afraid I can ramble on as Jude does sometimes."

"I love it." She paused, then said, "Come join the kids."

confidence; by his disregard of a daughter's trust.

"Just go," Judy sobbed again. "Please go and leave me alone."

Mark waited another moment. Then he turned slowly left the room. He knew it was all that he could do.

the call of a solicitor. But this solicitor was demanding, and Lithe thought of the telephone calls throughout the day. Curtly, he dismissed each of the calls as he had screamed about his reward. She smiled, remembering the tone in his voice. Then the smile faded as she worried about the new attitude that had so quickly come over him, one of aloofness to sex. It was inconceivable. She could not understand it.

Lithe opened the door before Pete could touch the handle.

"Well, that's the kind of welcome I've been expecting," he said.

"Really?" Lithe answered.

"You know it," Pete replied cockily. When she did not open the door wider or step aside, Pete quickly slid through the doorway and past Lithe.

"I didn't ask you in, Pete," she said with exaggerated haughtiness.

"Really?" he said, mimicking her, then, wickedly "Guess you know why I'm here. And why I didn't call at this time." He pushed the door and it clicked shut.

"I'm really very busy, Pete," Lithe said.

"You're about to be busier." He took a step toward her, smiling crookedly.

She turned coy and put her hands on his chest. "Come on, Pete—really, I have dozens of things to do."

"You do have things to do, baby. With me. And right now."

Lithe hesitated. She looked into his eyes. Then, as if she knew that she could no longer charm him, her expression changed. It became angry, impatient, and bored. She dropped her hands from his chest and said "Get the hell out of here, Pete. I don't want to see you

and angry. His eyes burned and his lean body seemed poised for a leaping release. His hands shot to her shoulders and held her tightly.

Claudia glanced at Mark then followed the direction of his eyes. "Oh, oh. What's that?" she remarked, her tone worried.

"I don't know."

She looked up at him. "Think we'd better find out?"

He waited, then said, "I'll go over."

Neither the boy nor Lithe saw Mark approach as he skirted the yard. As he drew closer Mark heard the boy's angry voice rasping a mumbled accusation. He did not hurry his pace. Instead, his eyes remained frozen upon Lithe. She stared straight into the boy's face, showing neither fear nor embarrassment. Her face showed an expression of amused indifference. Mark coughed lightly when he was a few feet away from the couple.

The boy jumped back. Lithe merely turned her head and smiled.

"I'm making the rounds," Mark said to her. "Quite a few of your gang I haven't met, including this young fellow."

Lithe's smile widened and her eyes darkened. She looked at the boy for a moment without speaking, then said, "This is Pete Hobson. Pete—this is Judy's father."

The boy shot Mark a quick look and bobbed his head.

Mark nodded to the boy but did not extend his hand.

Lithe turned from Pete to Mark and said, "We were just going for a sandwich. Would you like to join us?"

Lithe's head jerked to the side and she leaned harder against the bannister rail. A red blotch streaked her face.

Pete gripped her shoulders just as she turned her head to look at him again. Roughly, he pulled her away from the bannister and pushed hard. She landed, arms and legs stretched outward, against the stairs. She could feel the rough material of the carpeting against her buttocks and she knew that her skirt had lifted high at her waist as she fell.

Pete was atop her in an instant. He pinned her shoulders backward, jamming her body in a crazy edge of straining as she was forced against the stairs. He lowered his face and brought his mouth down to hers. Lithe felt his lips slacken, go soft, as he pleaded at her mouth, bringing, Lithe knew, passion to his pursuit in an effort to spark her, turn her away and make her go misty with desire for his youth and manhood.

He released one hand from her shoulder and brought it to her breast. For a moment he kneaded the outside of her blouse. His fingertips grew delicate at her inverted nipple, teasingly intent on making it rise, hot and sharp, as if this sign was necessary before continuing.

Lithe allowed her body to relax a bit. Pete pushed himself harder to his task, pleading at her mouth now, but commanding as he worked his tongue against her lips, whisking sharply to and forth.

Lithe waited, felt his knee dig hard at her and the pinch of his fingers at her breast as he pressed himself to her, his body unbearably struck with excitement.

Lithe waited a second—waited until the possible return from the mysteries of her

Chapter Sixteen

Mark crushed his cigarette out and looked again at the early morning mist rising above the front awn of his home. He thought of Judy and when he recalled her dark expression of disbelief and the contempt of her voice when she sent him away from her, he swung his chair away from the study window and stared at the telephone on his desk. Almost physically, he again restrained the wish to call Claudia and determine the early morning welfare of his daughter.

He glanced at his watch and was astonished by the slow passage of time. It was six o'clock, only five hours since he had left Claudia's house. Again, he reviewed the decision he had made to tell Judy everything truthfully and quickly. Again he wondered at the wisdom of that decision. And once again, he knew that he could not have done otherwise.

Mark lighted a cigarette and leaned far back in his chair, in an effort to lessen the tension that informed him. But his mind was relentless, compelling him to think of Judy, of all the years of her growth, the joy and happiness he had always known with her. It seemed that every phase of her childhood stared at him, causing the pain of remembrance. And

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MEET MARILYN—SLOANE BRITAIN: She was an empress who never took "no" for an answer—even from a woman.

WHATEVER SHE WANTED—JESS DRAPER: The strange story of a beautiful girl who invited shame and punishment.

ONE OF THE GIRLS—RICHARD MEZATESTA: She was in "The Business" and nobody twisted her arm—she enjoyed every sordid working hour.

37 SOFT IN THE SHADOWS—JOHN TURNER: They were a strange triangle—a man, his wife, the overnight guest.

288 NIGHT AFTER NIGHT—WILL SAXON: She wanted thrills, not love—and she got them night after night.

F289 NINE TO FIVE—JOSEPH COMMINGS: She was a very private secretary with a very special talent for closing deals.

#F290 THE INTRUDER—JUDD POWELL: He sought his revenge through the wives of his enemies and they were warm and willing tools.

#F291 LESBIANISM AROUND THE WORLD—R. LEIGHTON HASSELRODT: An enlightening and intimate study of Lesbianism on a global scale.

#F292 NURSE CAROLYN—LOREN BEAUCHAMP: Carolyn was just what the doctor ordered, but more than the patient could take.

#F293 TOO YOUNG TO MARRY—JOAN ELLIS: Janice was pretty and pampered—she came of age on a hot-rod honeymoon.

296 THE HEAT OF DAY—MARCH HASTINGS: Two young girls find forbidden pleasures in a world without men.

F297 THE CAPTIVE—JOHN TURNER: She took a ride of terror with a man who had not seen a woman in nine years.

#F298 MADE TO ORDER—GREG HAMILTON: She wanted the best, so she made a deal with the devil—a bargain in flesh.

#F299 NOTHING TO LOSE—KIMBERLY KEMP: She made the big-time under the guidance of a female manager who took her fee in a strange way.

Chapter Two

It was nearly midnight when Mark Corbin stepped onto the porch of Claudia Rant's house. She opened the door even before the echo of the door chimes faded.

Mark looked at her body, only lightly concealed in a thin negligee. For a moment a smile almost broke through the grim lines of his face. When it did not appear, even its hint disappeared, giving him a tired, weighted look.

"Nice of you to postpone sleeping for me," he said.

"Don't be stupid, darling. You know me. I grab every chance I can to make my points. Come on, let's sit down and have a drink."

"That sounds like something I can use."

He pulled off his trench coat, then followed Claudia into the study. Within a few minutes she had made their drinks and placed them on a small table in front of the couch. Curling her knees beneath her hips, she huddled into a corner of the couch and looked at Mark.

His mouth formed a tight smile as he picked up his glass, jogged it toward her, then swallowed a third of the amber liquid.

their proper place. I have regrets that my marriage was a failure, but if I hadn't married, I doubt that I'd be as well prepared as I am now for a new marriage—successful one. And if that sounds like a hint—it is. Let's not forget that Judy's graduating in a couple of months. That's when we said it'd be sensible to talk about us."

"Very sensible. You know, I had very little experience in my teens. Actually, Ruth was the only girl I ever had and I married her when I was still a kid. Pretty unsophisticated, eh?"

"Yes. Delightfully so," she purred.

Mark caught the fresh scent of her hair and the moment was suddenly free from worry. He brought her to him and held her close. She snuggled against him until they touched from head to toe.

His kiss was a gentle caress until Claudia burrowed her breasts into his chest and opened her lips. His tongue darted into her mouth as his hands rabbit-hopped over her eager body. Her hips rose and pushed like a wave breaking over the shore. She turned her mouth from his and whispered small, purring encouragements into his ear.

As if it had been a signal, Claudia slid her fingers beneath his belt and gently tugged. And Mark, duplicating the encouragement of her hand, reached high when she slid his palm within the bodice of her negligee, finding the fullness of her breast. For a moment he let his fingers trail over all of her skin, then, more deliberately he pinched at her nipple, rolled it between his fingers and gently stabbed at its end as it grew taut.

Love play ended suddenly. Claudia pushed back and hurried to her feet. Within a moment she had ripped the gown from her shoulders and let it fall to

the floor. She stood above him, nude, waiting for him to match her bareness.

When Mark made no immediate move to rise and strip his own body of clothing, Claudia quickly knelt by the couch and pushed at his chest.

"Lie down," she panted. "Lie down and let me—"

Hesitantly, Mark let her hands at his chest guide him until he was prone on the couch.

First Claudia loosened his collar and tie, then worked at buttons, her fingers growing impatient but succeeding. Then, in more hurried fashion she worked at his trousers until he, too, grew impatient and let his own fingers join hers in a fury of motion.

When his clothing had joined Claudia's in a pile on the floor, she again pushed against his chest, forcing him downward. Then she raised above him and hesitated, breathing hard.

She looked into his eyes, her breasts an inch above his bare chest. "Sweet, sweet Mark, let me love you. We have time—all the time in the world."

Rolling her shoulders slightly she lowered her breasts so that they could pat and caress at his forehead, his eyes, his nose, then his mouth where they lingered until he made the opening that consumed them, first one then the other as she created the action, brought ingenuity to his responses.

In a moment she moved lower. Still hunched above him like a kitten lapping at some secret pool of delight, she kissed at his chest and ribs and Mark could feel her mouth go dry from the constant pressure against his skin.

He wound his fingers within her hair, wanting more of her journey yet not forcing it nor motivating any new explorations. And, though his response was ascending—although it held the promise of ful-

Chapter Three

"Don't stop—don't stop, Pete. Not yet, please . . ." Lithe worked her hips harder against the laboring boy.

But there was no waiting, no lasting for him. He groaned, then let his body sag against the naked Lithe. Swiftly, she jerked to a sitting position, then pushed against Pete's chest. "Get away from me, you miserable bastard. Get away until you learn how to be a man."

Pete rolled away from her. He began to fumble with his clothing, then turned and looked at her. Her breasts were raised high to her breasts and she held them close together with locked fingers. Her eyes glazed and a sneering, offended expression played across her face.

"You think you're so hot," she hissed. "You're nothing, Pete, nothing at all."

"Cut it out, Lithe," Pete interrupted. "Hell, how do you expect me to be, right here in your house—when your mother might come home any minute?"

"You should be a man under any conditions. Anywhere, any place," she said coldly. "I don't seem to

worry, do I?" She raised her hands and ran them down the length of her bare body.

Pete's eyes lowered and settled on the white carpet which had been the scene of their lust. "I'm sorry. Next time it'll be different, Lithe, I know it will."

She raised her chin haughtily. "There may not be a next time' for you, Pete."

His eyes turned angry. "Damn it now, Lithe. Don't start that again. Don't try and make me jealous like you did at the party. Some day you'll get me so mad I'll . . ."

"What? Beat me? Maybe make love to another girl? Well, go ahead. They're welcome to you. You're a pup, not a man."

Anger left his eyes and it was replaced by a look of denial. He tried to deny it with greater force in his words. "What do you expect? Lithe, what the hell do you expect?"

"What I expect is a man."

He looked away from her. "A man like Judy's Dad."

She smiled and for a moment she gave her a thought. "Corbin? Why?"

"Because you're like him. Every way. That is."

Very simply. Very calmly. Very gently. Very caressed. Very real man. Very and the very. "and I couldn't resist."

"What do you want?"

your school counselor, I suppose," the boy sneered.

"Perhaps," she answered casually. "But Miste Jepson doesn't appeal to me anymore." She drew her legs under her buttocks and stretched, causing her breasts to grow, then relaxed as she broke the pose and jumped to her feet.

Pete, too, pushed to his feet.

"You'd better leave now," Lithe said.

"Why? I'll wait for you to dress."

She made a face at him and said, "Can't, puppy-boy. I'm going to Judy's house."

"Can't I drive in with you?" he asked.

"No, puppy-boy, you cannot."

"Damn it, will you please stop calling me that?"

"Of course I won't. Not until you prove you're not a mere pup of a boy." She paused and glanced past him to the foyer. "The door's over there."

He clenched his fists, started to speak, then checked himself, turned and left the room. In a moment the door slammed shut behind him.

Lithe laughed softly then walked across the large living room and up the stairs to her room. As soon as she entered the bedroom she went to the mirror and took a long look at her body. As if satisfied that it was all in place, she smiled and hurried into the bathroom.

The needle-spray shower stabbed her sharply. But it gave pleasure, not pain. She was very quiet beneath it for a few minutes, then she took a large, foam rubber sponge and massaged her body. At her breasts she slowed the action of the sponge, then, as if satisfied with the thought that came to her, she increased the action, making hard circles that covered all of her large breast.

She smiled and wondered why it was that she could

bring herself more pleasure than the steaming, quivering, Pete Hobson. She slowed the action, not letting it raise her to any pitch from which there could be no return.

The sponge circled at her stomach, slowed, then moved faster. Her eyes closed, then opened, then closed again as she brought the motion lower to her thighs. She felt her nipples extend. The speed increased and she remembered her breast pushed hard against Mark Corbin. He had not moved his arm, she remembered. He had liked it. He would have to be a freak not to find pleasure in her young body. And, Mark Corbin was definitely not a freak.

Lithe began to move the sponge in rhythmic circles. Then, because her action represented a beginning, she remembered the first time she had seen Mark Corbin. It had been a day that he had met his daughter at school. Lithe smiled as she remembered his long strides as he paced in front of the school entrance. Soon after, she recalled, her new friendship with Judy grew, until they were inseparable.

She felt her body growing warm beneath the shower. She dropped the sponge, resisting the full impact from the action at her thighs. It would seem such a waste, she thought.

Facing the downward pour of the shower, letting it gush over all of the front of her, Lithe wondered about the attractiveness of Mark Corbin. She compared him to her school counselor and wondered how they might be different, or, if there was any true difference in men as far as girls were concerned. Then she thought about her own urge to be with Mark Corbin, about how wonderful she felt when he was near. And, because the thought was of a man—an older man—she remembered individually each of the many men in her mother's life. But she frowned.

ne of them brought pleasant memories or good
lings.

She exiled all thoughts from her mind as she turned
the shower handle and stopped the water. After she
stepped out of the steamy booth she towed herself
tenderly, bringing pinkness to all of her body.

Lithe took a lot of time selecting the exact clothing
she wanted to wear. She finally chose a short, dark
skirt, knee-socks and a large, bulky sweater that sub-
verted the effect of her breasts. Perfect school-girl at-
titude, she thought. Exactly the image she wished to
present that day.

Lithe parked her mother's car in front of the Cor-
n house. She glanced to the end of the long drive-
way and was delighted to see—as she had expected
to see on a Saturday afternoon—that Mark's car was
there.

Judy met her at the door. Her head was tight in a
lower cap and she wore a quilted robe. "Hi, Lithe,"
she said. "I heard you pull up in front. I'm just
lowering—forgive me for not being ready."

"That's all right," Lithe said. "Take your time."

Judy led her into the house. "Want to come up-
stairs and wait for me?"

"No, I'll only delay you more. Suppose I just wait
in the living room?"

"All right, if you want to."

At the living room entrance Judy smiled and put a
finger to her lips in a sign for silence. She nodded to
the adjoining study, then said, "Dad's working—
better be like a mouse or he'll kill us."

its end where an oil painting of Judy's mother was perfectly squared against the wall. She stood quietly, looking at it from a distance. Soon, she turned and walked to the opposite end of the room where a large no sat in a corner. She sat on the edge of the piano and leafed through several pages of sheet music that rested above the keyboard. She brought her hands above the keys in playing position, held them there a few moments, turned and looked at the closed door of the study, smiled, then brought her hands back to her lap.

Then, as deliberately as if she were answering a call, she swung around on the bench, stood up and walked to the study door. She paused a second, then knocked lightly on the dark wood.

The door opened and Lithe smiled brightly at Mark.

"Well, hello," he said. "I didn't know you were here."

"Yes. I just arrived. Judy and I are going to a show tonight and she invited me over early." She paused, then said, "She's showering."

"Oh," Mark said. A frown puckered at his forehead.

Very quickly, Lithe added, "I hope I didn't disturb you, Mister Corbin—Judy warned me not to—but—well, could I talk to you for a few minutes?"

"Of course," he said. He stood back and threw the door open more widely. "Come in and sit down."

Lithe followed him into the study. A large drawing board lined one wall and was piled high with brightly colored brochures and sketches. Full-wall bookcases were on the other side. Mark's desk was at the far end of the room facing the door, its back to a large, picture window. The drapes were closed.

Mark walked behind his desk and motioned to a comfortable leather chair a few feet away. He waited

the desk and turned to her.

Lithe looked at him and smiled again. A thought scampered through her mind. She remembered sitting in an identical position at her high school counselor's desk. But then, she recalled, her legs were silk clad and crossed so that her skirt was hiked well above her knees.

"Well, Lithe, what can I do for you?" Mark asked.

She waited a second, feeling that her first words had to be perfect, that they must immediately put Mark Corbin at ease, endow him with confidence and acceptance of her relationship with his daughter.

"I—well I—" She stopped, made her eyes go dim, then glanced away.

Mark picked up a pipe from his desk and scooped into a tobacco humidor. He was about to speak when Lithe continued.

"Well—I just had to talk to you, Mister Corbin."

Mark smiled and said, "I gathered that's what you wanted, Lithe."

"Yes. I wanted to explain," she said quickly, the words dewy with sincerity.

He nodded as he tapped the tobacco into the pipe bowl, but remained silent.

"I want to explain about the other night, Mister Corbin," Lithe said. Her words gained strength.

Mark lighted his pipe and looked at Lithe through the smoke. "Good, I'm glad you do." His forehead wrinkled and she wondered if it was from his sudden interest or a result of drawing on the pipe.

Lithe leaned forward, then hurriedly, almost impetuously, she said, "You see, Mister Corbin, I'm very fond of Judy. I—I don't want you to think because of what you saw the other night—because c

that boy and me—that—well, that Judy and I—that I can't be her friend any longer."

Mark took the pipe from his mouth then gently rubbed its bowl against his chin.

"It's odd that you should come and speak to me about this today," he said thoughtfully. "It's been on my mind and I want you to understand, Lithe, that I won't let Judy be changed from the girl her mother raised her to be. Promiscuity isn't a part of Jude, nor is it going to be."

Lithe straightened in her chair. "You're saying I'm promiscuous, Mister Corbin?"

He glanced away and did not answer.

Lithe breathed deeply, then said, "Mister Corbin, I admit that I am a—a little freer with boys than some girls are. But I wouldn't force my way of life on Judy. And it's because we *are* so different that we're such great friends. Judy understands this—we've talked about it very candidly."

Lithe noticed a slight expression of relief cross Mark's face. It made her feel warm inside.

"Contrary to what you might think, Lithe," Mark said, "I'm not a stuffed-shirt. I know kids have a different moral code today—adults do, too—I know that petting goes on—that kids—" He stopped and looked more closely at her.

Lithe's smile came full and brilliant.

"What's the matter?" Mark asked. "Did I say something wrong?"

"You mentioned 'petting,' Mister Corbin. Today we call it 'making-out.'"

He grinned and said, "Oh."

She leaned more forward in the chair. "Mister Corbin, I just couldn't bear for you to think badly of me." She waited, then went on, "That incident with

the boy—with Pete—I'm—I'm so sorry. I just wish it had never happened. But, honestly—things like that won't happen to Judy because of me."

The last hard lines on Mark's forehead disappeared. "I hope you really mean that, Lithe."

She breathed deeply again, thinking how wise she had been to select a sweater that would not remind Mark Corbin of the voluptuousness of her body.

Then she said in small-girl fashion, "Gee, Mister Corbin, it's wonderful talking to you. You're great! You seem to be the most liberal—most understanding man I've ever known." She paused and brought quick sadness to her eyes. "You know, I've never had a man—I mean, a real man to talk to. After my father—well, after he left, I didn't have anyone. I—I still don't."

Very kindly, Mark said, "I can understand that, Lithe. It can account for many things in your life."

She nodded and said, "I've been terribly worried. And—and it has been a little embarrassing to mention."

"Well, I think we should just forget the whole matter," Mark said. "You know what I expect in regards to Judy, so we can forget the rest."

"Oh, thank you, Mister Corbin," she said, bringing a note of gratitude to her voice.

Mark's brow crinkled because of some quiet consideration as he placed his pipe in a large, brass ashtray. Then he turned back to Lithe. "You're really quite profound, young lady. I agree with your proposition that people can be different and still get along well together."

"Oh, thank you. I'm thrilled that you agree with me."

She settled back in her chair and crossed her legs. She was aware that part of her bare thigh was exposed.

Now, she did not care. It no longer seemed necessary to hide the lines of her body. She sensed that deep alliances—hidden ties that she did not even understand—had been established with Mark Corbin. And, she knew that they were strong enough to veil the ache of desire within her young body.

Lithe noted, too, with a hint of amusement, that Mark had been very quick to accept her explanation. It was almost as if he sought to find excuses for her, to forgive her and not fear her, and thus keep intact the friendship with his daughter. She felt elated.

Before either of them spoke again, Judy came skipping merrily into the room.

"Oh, oh," Judy laughed. "So Dad caught you, eh?"

"Yes," Mark said.

Judy stopped at the desk, leaned down and looked concernedly at her father. Then she said, "Dad, you've been cooped up in this room too long. It's a beautiful day. You should have a little of it."

She walked around his desk and pulled the drapery cord. A bright shaft of sunlight, still strong though setting, shot through the room. Then Judy untied a latch and pushed open the window. She breathed deeply.

Mark swung his chair around and faced the window. He, . . . gardens.

"Oh, w

Please, Dad—real soon. You need a good way. Could we go as soon as the play's over?"

"We'll see," he said. "I'm anxious to get there to And we'll invite Lithe for the first week-end, won't Dad?"

Mark smiled at his daughter, then turned to Lithe of course. Your friends are always welcome, Judy knows that."

Judy turned from the window and hurried over to her friend. "Oh, Lithe, you'll love The Lark."

"The Lark?"

"Yes. That's our cottage. We named it The Lark because it's for fun and forgetting society, for being ourselves."

Chapter Four

Lithe yawned, stretched, then looked at Judy sitting in the bed next to her. She smiled at the position Judy had assumed. Her back was braced with pillows against the headboard of Lithe's large bed. A book was open and propped on her raised knees. Judy held the book with both hands and her head was bent low, her eyes following the lines of print as her mouth silently formed exaggerated words and phrases.

Lithe tossed her own book to the floor, turned on her side, smiled even more vividly and asked, "Is French really that engrossing?"

Judy turned from the book. "Not at all. But my exam will be."

"You'll pass," Lithe said assuredly.

"I think so, too," Judy agreed. She closed the book with a snap and dropped it at the foot of the bed. She looked around the room, then said, "This is fun. I like staying with you. Did your mother mind?"

"Of course not," Lithe laughed, but her tone was faintly laced with cynicism. "Besides, she's not coming home tonight."

"Oh, that's too bad."

"No it isn't," Lithe said, somewhat sharply. "Si

at a house party. So you and I can have a party of our own."

"It is like a party," Judy said.

"Sure it is," Lithe agreed. As if to emphasize the cheerfulness of her words she brought her hand down in a hard plop on the bed. Then she said, "What did your father think about you visiting for the night?"

"He was very agreeable," Judy said. "He likes you, Lithe."

"Really?" A tremor of excitement touched at each syllable of the word.

"Of course he does. I can tell."

"How can you tell?" Lithe pushed herself down low in the bed so that she could lie on her stomach, cuddle her head on her arms and look up at Judy.

"Oh, lots of ways," Judy said. "I can tell when Dad's interested in someone. Why, just the other night he was asking me about your grades in school—if they were still high. He really is interested in you, Lithe."

"I'm glad," she said.

She felt a smile begin, then checked it. But she could not check the heat that began at her breasts, glowed, became almost hot, then lowered to her thighs where it settled.

She looked appreciatively at Judy and wondered why she had never realized how truly lovely she was. Lithe's eyes followed the lines of her friend's body and was a little surprised to discover that she was very adequately formed, even if on a less extreme basis than herself.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Judy asked, laughing a bit self-consciously.

"I'm not just looking—I'm evaluating you. You're quite beautiful, Jude."

"Oh, really, now. Stop it, you make me feel conspicuous."

"Which you are in that short nightie," Lithe replied.

Judy laughed again and hugged her knees to her chest. She looked up at the ceiling as if she were seeing a review of things to come, then she said, "Just think, Lithe. The play—then just another few weeks and duation. I can hardly believe it." She paused to think about it a moment, then, excitedly continued, "and just think—the order of our class puts us right next to each other when we get our diplomas. You'll walk onto the stage right in front of me."

"Yes, I think that's great," Lithe replied.

They grew quiet, each possessed with individual thoughts that did not require sharing.

Lithe lowered her head and let her cheek rest on the bed. It felt cool and she thought how odd it was, that the heat at her thighs had become intense. She closed her eyes and thought of motion, feeling the temptation to exert her hips in rapid movements against the bed. She heard Judy move and again thought of the girl's body, wondering if her fascination for the physical attractiveness of her friend's body was in some way associated with her desire for Mark, as if by not yet having the one she could accept the other. The thought made her remember a long ago instance when her body had been with that of another girl. She tried to recall what it was like, what she felt and whether the experience had been satisfying. But she could not remember any part of the act. Instead, she remembered it only as a blur of naked bodies, thrashing and seeking, and she could not recall how it had ended, if indeed there had been an end attainment for her.

She remained very still as a new pulsation came over her and she felt it throbbing stronger and stronger, more and more deeply imbedded within her.

it prisoner until she knew that it was real and would not fade. Then, slowly she pushed away from the bed and gained a sitting position for a moment before finally standing and walking to the vanity against the wall. She sat down and began brushing at her hair vigorously, viewing herself through the mirror with new interest. She became aware of Judy quietly watching her. But she did not make any remark that would break the sudden mood that had come to her. When she finished with her hair, Lithe stood up and raised her arms high above her head as she approached Judy. Then she let them drop quickly.

"I'm warm," she said. In lightening motion Lithe bent and clutched the bottom of her nightgown. Quickly, she raised up and whipped the gown over her head. She stretched on her tip-toes, nude presenting herself toward Judy. She held the pose for a moment then broke it and tossed her gown to the far side of the room.

Judy shyly glanced away.

"What's the matter?" Lithe asked. "Don't you like my body?"

"You're—you're beautiful, Lithe."

"Then you get beautiful, too," Lithe kidded. "Come on, join the nudist camp." She walked over to Judy and tugged at the bottom of her nightie.

A slight flush came to Judy's cheeks but she laughed and said, "Should I?"

"Of course. Come on."

Judy scrambled out of the bed and, duplicating Lithe's gestures, banished the thin material from her body.

Naked, they faced each other and Lithe had the quick illusion of viewing herself in a mirror, as if a trick glass had presented a smaller version of her own body.

Judy was very quiet, as if she had been caught up in some strange compliance with wishes she did not understand, but, nevertheless was meant to obey.

Lithe sensed Judy's feelings and felt power within herself grow in the knowledge that this girl—this daughter of her phantasy-lover—would do, must do, anything she desired. She reached her hands out and touched at the tips of Judy's breasts. Their bodies trembled at the same time and Lithe could feel her own nipples extending even as she made Judy's grow with light, fingertip caresses.

She pulled Judy closer to her in a position that almost compelled their breasts to touch. Then, very quietly, she said, "I love you, Jude. I guess you know that—that girls can love each other."

"I—I never considered it." She paused, then, with great intentness said, "But I do love you, Lithe. I really do. You mean everything to me."

"I'm glad you do," Lithe said. "Very glad."

Judy turned her head a bit to the side then looked back to her friend and asked, "Lithe—have you ever—well—you said girls could love each other—well, have you ever—ever done it with a girl?"

"Once, a long time ago. When I was in boarding school."

"Oh."

"But I didn't love her as I do you, Jude."

When Judy did not answer, Lithe gripped her shoulders and guided her to a sitting position on the bed's edge. Lithe laced her hands at the back of Judy's head and looked down at her. Judy did not move but seemed to wait patiently for any command. Abruptly, Lithe jerked the head to the softness of her breasts and held it there. But Lithe felt no hunger at her touch, no thirst at her hard, pointing nipples. She released Judy's head and stepped back.

Sadly, Judy looked up at her and said, "I'm sorry, Lithe. I—I keep thinking this is wrong. Is it?"

"Of course not, sweet. Love doesn't have to have a sex."

She bent and kissed easily at Judy's throat and ears, then, as if pushed by a sudden, new drive, she pushed Judy downward to the bed and crawled next to her. As Judy stretched full-length to the position of acceptance, Lithe tried again to remember the circumstances of her previous lesbian experience. But the memory was too far away—Judy was too close. No old vision could be renewed.

But Lithe made her mind an ally in lust's quest. She thought of Mark Corbin, his stern, good-looks, his tall, strong body, then, almost as if she were memorizing lines of a drama, she thought again and again. *This is Mark's daughter—Mark's daughter—Judy is Mark's and Mark will be mine.*

She pulled her body even with Judy, turned her, then clamped her mouth to the girl's lips.

Now, memory was not needed. Recall of actions and feelings was not needed. There was no necessity for plot or plan. Her own hot mouth, her tongue, her whipping breasts, and the heat at her thighs pushed her body upward and onward and locked her in a fierce and angry pose of conquest.

Judy responded slightly and Lithe had the feeling that she was merely being permissive and conforming rather than impulsive. But she did not care. Her body shook. Hot, heavy breathing sounds and half-formed words gurgled in her throat. Tears congealed and dropped, mixing with the total, salt-wetness of her body as she moved faster and harder against Judy's body.

Lithe's finish was less than what had been promised by her mighty efforts and fast gathering approach.

Her body only fluttered, moved again and fluttered once more on a lower level as her motion slowed, the throat sounds stopped, muscles softened and her body heat cooled. She rolled to her side and brought a small, hard fist against her eyes, shutting out, it suggested, the torment of a dismal end.

Judy twisted to her side and moved closer. Lithe, moved, rejecting the body, the girl, the act, even that very moment. The searing pains of incompleteness confirmed her rapid thoughts, told her that relief—responsive, gratifying, body-shuddering relief—could only come from the father, not the daughter.

—that he, too, was feeling the excitement she shared.

As if to confirm a mental image she pulled the curtain apart a few inches and glanced to the third row. Mark was there. Claudia sat next to him, smiling happily.

Mark's smile was wide and Lithe knew that it was for the performance of his daughter. She knew, too, that he must also feel relief that the play was over, that at last the weeks of rehearsal and planning had ended with audience approval.

It was a perfect time, Lithe thought. A perfect time to have a week-end at the Corbin Cottage. Long ago she had learned that fun should begin on a high note—start on happiness. It intensified new pleasures.

She let the curtain fall back in place and turned just as Judy came bounding to her.

"It was you, Lithe—you, who made the play," Judy cried excitedly.

"Don't be stupid," Lithe snapped. "It was the leading lady. You were great—better than even I expected you could be."

"But if the curtain hadn't closed fast—I knew something was wrong when I heard some commotion—then I knew that you were closing the curtain yourself. You saved the play—but, what happened?"

"Calm down. It's over and we had a good show." She waited and glanced over her shoulder at a fair-haired boy who stood alone at the back of the stage. Then she said, "I did close the curtain. Junior over there was dreaming again so I pushed him out of the way and made the cue on time."

Dramatically, Judy clasped her hands to her breast. "You saved it for me, Lithe. You're the unsung—unseen heroine. Oh, thank you, Lithe, thank you."

Somewhat embarrassed, Lithe glanced to the floor. "Well, come on—you have your folks to see and we

He did not answer at once. His brow grew deeper and his eyes darkened. After a moment, he said, "Yes, I remember. Rather odd you didn't tell me ahead of time, isn't it?"

"When have you been home for me to tell you anything, Dad?"

Lithe moved a step closer to Mark. She raised one hand and as if she wanted to touch his arm. Instead, she dropped it and let her smile go even brighter. "I really not much of a date, Mister Corbin. We're going to dance a bit, then probably have a bite to eat on the way home."

Claudia, noticing the darkness that had come to Mark, made an attempt to lighten it by saying, "Food always the winner. Where in the world do you kid out it all?"

Lithe looked directly into Mark's eyes, thinking now he held her look. And she knew that he must feel things for her as a woman—not just as his daughter or friend. She looked at the shadows above his eyes that seemed to have suddenly appeared and she knew they were prompted by a new fear that had come to him—a new fear for his daughter as Pete Hobson's date. She knew that Mark was remembering the instance of his meeting with Pete, remembering it and fearing that Judy might very soon be a new object for the boy's aggressions.

And Lithe felt pleasure for all the things she knew tormented Mark at that moment. Her reasons were not clear. But she knew that her influence—her friendship with Judy Corbin was her strongest entrance to a relationship with Mark. Lithe did not think beyond that possibility. It was her single goal.

Mark turned his attention back to Judy. "You won't be late?" There was a note of resignation in his voice.

"Of course not, Dad. After all, tomorrow we're off for the country. We are leaving early, aren't we?"

"I planned on it," he said.

"Then don't worry about us. We'll be home early."

Mark did not answer. Then Claudia suggested, "Come, darling, we'd better leave the girls to dressing and their dates."

There was another moment's quick conversation, then the girls departed for the dressing room and the boys whom they were to meet.

They dressed quickly, Lithe in an extraordinarily low-cut, yellow gown; Judy, in a neat blue dress that revealed her body but did not offer it.

They left the locker room and walked to the middle of the stage. Here, they paused and looked around, feeling again the hour of their triumph. Then they hurried down the aisle and out the front door of the school.

A car was waiting for them at the curb. A tall, very blond boy jumped out and walked up to the girls. "Well, hello there," he said to Lithe.

She waited while he glanced at the visible fullness of her breasts, then, as if to deny him any part of herself she slipped a light stole around her shoulders and drew it closed in front.

Lithe turned to Judy. "This is Ron Barber—Ron, Judy Corbin."

"Well, hello to you, too," Ron said, glancing the full-length of her, obviously taking pleasure in her mature breasts, narrow waist and good legs.

"Where's Pete?" Lithe asked.

"In the car," Ron said.

"Then—away we go," Lithe replied.

At the car Pete roused himself from the back seat long enough to push the door open.

a slight salutation as she entered. His eyes seemed angry when he looked at Lithe.

"What's the matter with you, Pete?" Judy asked. "Not talking tonight?"

"Why talk?" he answered.

"Why, anything, for you, Pete?" Lithe said.

"Man, you cats don't talk English, do you?" Ron said, raising his eyebrows in make-believe wonder.

"Are you in college?" Judy asked Ron.

He laughed as he settled behind the steering wheel.

"Yeah, I'm in college—dear old, S.O.H.K."

Judy cocked her head and looked at Lithe.

"Ron's trying to be cute," she said. "School of Hard Knocks, is what he means. Ron plays drums in a band. When he's working, that is."

"Oh," Judy said. "How interesting."

"It's that all right," Ron said. He waited, then in a bored manner said, "Well, are we going to sit in front of your alma mater all night?"

Lithe nudged closer to him. "You wouldn't be just sitting very long, I bet."

"You better believe it," he said.

"Where are we going?" Judy asked.

"The Lighthouse," Lithe answered. "They have an excellent band for dancing."

"And the management's not too fussy about selling booze," Ron said. He gunned the car into motion and shot away from the curb.

"Some of the kids are going to Carl Raymond's house," Judy said hopefully. "We're invited."

"You wouldn't like it there," Pete said. "They're all squares."

Agreeably, Judy said, "Okay, The Lighthouse it is."

They arrived fifteen minutes later.

Only Lithe and Ron seemed at all poised as they entered the small roadhouse. Judy kept glancing

around as if she expected to be arrested at any minute. Pete attempted to hide his self-consciousness with slouched shoulders and a sneering, bored expression.

They followed a hostess to a small table. As soon as she disappeared, Lithe said, "What do you drink, Judy?"

"Coke, I guess," she answered.

"With Rum, you mean," Ron kidded.

"No, with ice," Judy laughed.

"Oh, come on now," Lithe encouraged. "This is a celebration. You're a leading lady with a successful opening night behind you. You must have a drink to celebrate."

"Sure," Pete said. "You need to loosen up a little."

Very definitely, but with friendliness, Judy said, "Really, no thank you." She paused and looked into Lithe's eyes before adding, "This is one more of the differences between us."

Lithe accepted it with a smile. "Of course, Judy, if that's the way you want it."

"It is."

"Man—I never thought I'd live to see it," Ron said.

"Me either," Pete added, bringing a note of comradeship to his words.

The waitress arrived and took their orders: bourbon for Lithe, rye and water, for Ron, a beer for Pete. Judy was allowed her Coke.

They finished their drinks, danced, had another drink and danced a few more sets. Lithe clung tightly to each of the boys in turn while Judy danced close, but reservedly, then, when it was nearly midnight, the four of them left The Lighthouse.

Lithe glanced at the back seat as she settled close to Ron. Pete's arm was around Judy's shoulder and her head was nestled against him. As soon as Ron started the car Lithe put her hand on his thigh. Her mind

rearranged the present, put Mark Corbin in the driver's seat, made it his thigh her hand caressed. Then she cuddled closer, allowing her breast to pat against Ron's side. He put his arm around her and clutched her other breast for a moment before sliding his hand down the front of her dress to meet her bareness.

Lithe remained close to Ron as he drove the car. But only part of herself was given to the closeness. All of her senses were attuned to the back seat, to Judy and Pete. She accepted the silence with satisfaction, knowing that the lull in conversation had been caused by a kiss. Lithe burrowed still closer to Ron. She felt his hand grip her breast more tightly, more urgently, then relax enough to fondle her nipple.

Still, she did not respond with excitement to his touch. The excitement she felt—and it was great—was not for the young man next to her, it was for Judy and Pete, a short, dark distance behind her. She wondered why it was so. Judy was truly her friend, one of the first, real friends she had ever had. And, she did recognize the differences in their lives. But did she want the differences to remain? Wasn't it likely that she wanted Judy to experience those things she herself had already experienced?

Only one thing seemed very sure to Lithe. She knew that the excitement she felt for Judy and the things that could happen to her with Pete, was, in some remote way, associated with Mark Corbin and her desire to have him. Judy was an extension of Mark—that was enough to cause excitement.

The thoughts of Mark ignited responses that the clutching hand of Ron had not been able to do. Lithe let her fingers go to Ron's waist, then jerked at his belt.

"Jeezus," he mumbled, then he moved the car ahead faster.

"Hey, slow down," Judy exclaimed from the back seat.

Lithe turned her head and looked at Judy. Pete held her close but Judy conveyed a picture of poise and reserve without a sign of disagreeableness.

"Whom do you mean, Judy?" Lithe asked. "The car or Pete?"

"Both," Judy laughed.

Lithe turned away as Pete worked to force Judy's mouth to his. There was quiet, then the sound of resistance.

"No, Pete," Judy said. "Kisses will be enough, thank you."

There was a grappling sound, another silence, then Judy said, "I mean what I say, Pete."

Lithe heard Pete move away from Judy. She smiled, knowing that he had moved to a corner of the car to sulk— The great-lover having been reduced to rejected child.

Again, Lithe tugged at Ron's waist. "Aren't you ever going to stop this car?"

"Right now, baby," he said. The car swerved, passed bright lights, then shot into darkness behind a roadside bar. In a few seconds Ron slammed on the brakes.

Almost immediately, Lithe shot her body close to him, lengthening herself against him until he, too, extended all of himself to her. Lithe pulled at the band of his trousers as she scooted into the corner of the car. She turned and let her head rest, slightly turned, on the window ledge, allowing her a full view of the shadowed bodies behind her. And the bodies were apart and silent.

Lithe saw Pete give up his period of sulking and pull Judy to him again. She watched the shadows merge and become one as they kissed. She felt pleased that Judy had lessened her defense enough for at least another kiss.

Lithe felt a pull at her skirt as Ron crushed himself closer to her. There was more fumbling then a curse from the boy.

"Jeezus, but you're clumsy," Lithe said. "Here." She arched her body and with her own fingers loosened and dismissed her light panties. Lithe looked to the back seat again. There was a movement of bodies as Judy's form scurried away from Pete. Then there was a lunge as Pete regathered her in his arms.

With her head still turned to the back seat, Lithe felt Ron rise, fumble, then draw himself close to her. She joined his erotic motion, but her interest, her senses, were focused on Judy and Pete. She watched them, waiting for the extra thrill she knew would be hers when Judy saw her and recognized the lewdness of the scene. She wondered if Judy would instantly recall when their bodies had been thrashing in similar motions. She wondered if she would feel hurt, or even envy.

Soon, she saw Pete grab at Judy's skirt and watched as his hands were firmly rebuked. She watched new attack and new defenses, even as her own body heaved relentlessly. She brought a new snap to her body as she watched Pete Hobson give up a final effort and draw away from Judy.

Lithe saw Judy move forward and put her hand on the door handle. Then, she felt, rather than saw the abruptness of Judy's pause and Lithe knew that her friend's face was only inches from herself and Ron, that she could not help but see all that was happening.

She wondered at all the things a girl like Judy would think and feel.

Lithe turned her head and looked into the face of her laboring lover who was moving at a new, shattering speed. She wrapped her arms around his neck and convulsed in a spasm of motion as she felt him approach his end. Almost instantly, Ron stiffened, paused, trembled, then went slack atop her as he emitted a final, gasping moan.

Lithe's excitement had become intense. And she knew that it was because Judy Corbin's hand was still clutching the door handle, because her body was tense and her eyes remained fastened to the front seat. Instinctively, she knew that Judy had become frozen. Frozen by interest—by awe—perhaps by shock. But she had not fled. She had witnessed the scene, pulled, Lithe was sure, by some unbreakable tie of curiosity, excitement, and friendship.

Lithe neither looked at, nor spoke to Judy. When Ron had unraveled his body and she had straightened her clothing, she merely said, "All right. Let's get Pete and go home."

Chapter Six

It was midafternoon when the sun lowered across the lake, denying its warmth to Mark who was asleep in a lounge chair in front of the cottage. He stirred. His head turned to the side then restlessly turned again. He awoke with a start. He looked around, then directly to the beach fifty yards in front of him. A square of blanket was the only break in the long stretch of golden sand. An hour earlier—after the week-end's equipment had been unloaded from the car and stored away—the beach had been alive with the happy enthusiasm of his daughter and Lithe Sutton. He looked far down the beach but there was no one to be seen.

Mark closed his eyes again. A dream fragment still encroached upon his wakefulness and by shutting out the day he hoped to recapture it. But he could not. The dream, and the revelations it had promised, were gone. He opened his eyes again and wondered why he had wished for the return of a dream. The day, and its enjoyment, was what he needed, not distorted subconscious wanderings.

When his eyes fastened on the empty beach again it

seemed that this had been part of his dream—beach and his daughter and Lithe Sutton. But, before he could consider it further and coax that which was hidden and gone to return, he heard the voices of girls behind him. He continued staring straight ahead at the lake. He smiled, listening to them approach, hearing their bright talk dotted with laughter and growing stronger as they grew nearer.

Finally, there was abrupt silence, then Judy's voice at a whisper-key, saying, "Shh. Dad's still sleeping bet."

"Look how quickly he's tanning," Lithe replied also whispering.

"I think he's part Indian," Judy said. "Besides, he lives in those Bermudas when he's here."

They reached the back of the lounge chair and Mark heard their steps become soft as they edged to his side. When he judged that they were only a few feet away, Mark, in a very level voice and without turning his head to look at them, said, "There's no need to be so quiet, young ladies. The old man's not quite so old as to sleep through the entire day."

His even tone shocked them as much as if he had shouted. They laughed, quieted to a giggle, then laughed again as they drew close to him.

"Dad! You scared us," Judy exclaimed. "I was sure you were still asleep."

"Yes," Lithe concurred. "Your body was so quiet."

"Naturally," Mark said. "I stop breathing for you kids."

"Not today, you haven't," Judy complained. "You've hardly moved since we got here."

"The country's for resting," he said. He looked closely at both girls, observing their nearly identical shorts and bulky sweat shirts. "And where have you two been? Last I knew you were on the beach."

"We walked into the village," Judy said.

"It's so quaint," Lithe added. She moved in front of Mark so that she was able to look directly at him. "I've always wanted to be close to a small, country town."

"Well, you are now." He pushed up from the reclining back of the chair. Then he turned and sat on the edge and asked, "So, what do you have planned now?"

"Nothing until Claudia gets here," Judy said.

Lithe turned and looked out at the lake.

Mark followed her gaze and watched the gentle bobbing of his cruiser tied at the end of a long, white dock.

Lithe turned to him and said, "I'm just dying to see the rest of the lake. Judy told me about the cove at the other end—about how picturesque it is."

"It's that, all right," Mark agreed.

"Why don't we spin the boat down there, Dad?" Judy inquired.

"Oh, would you?" Lithe asked excitedly. But quickly she checked her enthusiasm and turned to Judy. "We can't, Jude. Remember, we were going to straighten Claudia's room before she arrived."

"Oh, oh. I forgot, too," Judy said.

Lithe's eyes turned dark with disappointment.

"But, look," Judy said. "You and Dad go ahead. I'll fix Claudia's room. I've been to the cove dozens of times anyway."

Mark did not offer any comment. He wondered why he felt hesitation for so simple an arrangement.

Lithe took a step closer to Mark. "Could we, Mister Morbin?"

"Well—"

"Please?"

"It's early enough, I guess. Claudia won't be here until dark—the high price of Saturday work in beauty

salons." He paused, then said. "I want to give you a good work out anyway."

"Wonderful," Lithe said. She turned to look at him. "I won't think I'm skipping chores, will you?"

"Of course not. After all, you're the guest."

Mark pushed upright and stretched. Then he brought his arms down from above his head. He noticed that Lithe's eyes were glued to his waist. His look, it seemed, was one of casual investigation as if for an object she already knew well.

"Would you wait long enough for me to change?" Lithe asked.

"Sure thing," Mark said. "It'll take me that long to check the motor."

"Good. I'll hurry."

"And I'll start the hard labors of housework while you two play," Judy said with a quick wink at Lithe.

The girls hurried toward the cottage. Mark looked after them, then walked down the incline to the beach. He paused at the dock, feeling the heat of the sun-baked sand creep up his bare legs. Then he walked the length of dock and jumped aboard the small cruiser.

As he checked the gas tank and motor, he wondered at the feeling of interruption that was still with him—the odd feeling of incompleteness that had been with him since he had awakened. But when he raised his head from the motor and saw Lithe running down the dock, the feeling lessened.

She was smiling gleefully and wore a very short, merry cloth robe that was buttoned to the throat and ended high on the thigh, making her legs appear longer than they really were. Her hair was loose at her shoulders allowing the sun's rays to play at brightening it as she moved. She was barefooted. There was a dramatic movement of her breasts beneath the

breast at his arm, made rough by the material of her robe. He remembered the similar contact of the girl's body weeks earlier and wondered now, as he had then, if the movement was accidental or deliberate. He saw her from the corner of his eye and found no expression that showed more than friendliness and interest in the giant span of lake. Her hair had become wild and tangled by the wind and Mark could see bubbles of wetness throughout it, bringing a bright, sun-reflecting crown of youth and health to the platinum strands.

Without looking at Mark, with no discernible change in her expression, Lithe slipped her arm through his and cuddled closer to him as she continued to lean forward and look ahead.

Mark felt the heat of her body, enjoyed it, felt revitalized, and recognized that his earlier feeling of disorder and lapse was gone. It was as if the completion of the dream had finally been supplied by the physical nearness of Lithe Sutton. And Mark knew that the girl had surely been a principal of the dream, playing a part he had been forbidden to capture in sleep.

Neither of them risked words, the noise of the motor an ample excuse for silence. Nor did either of them move and disrupt the contact of their bodies. Mark felt only their gentle, joined breathing. And, though his mind could not recall any early boyhood experience to match it, he knew that all he felt was of, and for, that period of his life that had been missed and passed so long ago.

Mark pushed the throttle to full speed and the boat roared ahead.

Where the lake narrowed before widening again a mile farther east, Mark slowed the small craft to a lazy, searching pace. Lithe still had not moved and

He turned to Lithe. She smiled. He held out his hand. She walked across the deck, stopped in front of him, then after a moment's hesitation she took his hand.

"From here, we walk," he said.

"Wade, silly," she answered. Her voice was lower and more throaty, making her light words seem irrelevant and out of place. But the pressure of her fingers working in Mark's hand was meaningful and compatible with any age, any maturity, any pleasurable anticipation.

"All right, wade," Mark said. "Over the side." He raised her hand, urging her to the low deck rail.

"One second." She freed her hand from his. Facing him, she brought her hands to the top clasp of the short robe. She undid a button, then another, and finally the third and last. Her hands remained tight against her breasts, holding the opening of the robe together in a pose of demure reluctance. Then she smiled and pulled the robe apart and slipped it from her shoulders. It dropped to the deck.

The effect of her sudden bareness was startling for Mark. She wore a skimpy bikini, one that did not even try for concealment of her large breasts, her flat, tight belly, her firm and rounded thighs. All of the material, only tape-narrow, whispered of things even more joyous than total nudity.

Mark looked at her, aware that he was staring, yet not caring or attempting to disguise the complete awe he felt for her body.

Lithe's orange bikini halter covered, but did not conceal, the sharpness of her nipples. From there to a place devastatingly low below her navel there was bareness. It ended with the diaper-dip of the orange loin cloth. The sides were laced with lines of string that made diamond shaped patterns of her skin.

of her own steaming drive, a deterrent for the thrashing things within her that begged for outlet.

A sob caught in his throat and he leaped forward the few steps to reach her. Their bodies collided for Lithe had jumped to meet his assault at the same instant that he crashed against her.

No part of their bodies could resist contact. Their arms wound around each other's back, thighs slapped together, knees bumped, chest met breasts—exposed and jammed high above the swimsuit top—teeth clicked, then quieted as mouths opened to allow the new joining of their passion-driven tongues.

Mark lowered his hands to Lithe's buttocks then snapped her to him, bringing the scald of her thighs to meet his own heat. Then, as if the new contact was more than he could stand he grasped her shoulder and pushed her away.

She stumbled and half-fell to the sand. Mark grabbed her forearms and pulled her upright. Then

ered her mouth with his as she arched to him. Teeth and tongues clashed, parted, came together again, softened, then met in new violence.

Mark locked his fingers through the silky strands of her hair. He forced her head far back causing her to strain and show the pulsations of her throat. For a moment he held her that way and looked at her face, unlined, open-mouthed and with the point of her tongue showing between her pale lips. Mark's new strength and power gathered within him, increased in its immensity because of the new power that he had, the knowledge that Lithe was his to move in any way he wanted.

And what he wanted was the patient taking of her.

He loosened his fingers and allowed her to fall back on the sand. He hunched above her, then slowly and lovingly, kissed at her eyes and throat and breasts, lingering here for greater explorations of all the rounded flesh and the hard, pointing tips.

Lithe's body trembled and she cried out, moving her body restlessly.

Mark quieted her movement by placing one hand on an ankle, the other at her throat and holding her long and passive beneath his bowed head. But her passivity vanished when he left her breasts and kissed at her belly. Her hips gyrated and shot high to meet his onslaught and there was no peace that could be brought to the demand of her body.

He raised and looked at her. Her body continued to heave and revolve, imploring him. He waited, enjoying for a moment the agony of her longing, knowing that he had created it and that only he could bring her relief.

"Please—please—please!" Lithe cried. Her head twisting from side to side.

He continued to wait, continued to watch the orment that turned her savage and yelping. Then, lowly—very slowly and unmistakingly—he raised above her, looked into her eyes and immediately lost any view of them as he turned his mouth again to hers.

"Ahh," she mumbled well through the joined tunnel of their mouths.

Her passion soared as Mark moved slowly and deliberately, like a musician proving those chords from a well-known instrument.

And, as her body trembled, shook, convulsed and rapidly ground itself to the ecstasy of discovery, Mark caught the hysteria of her feeling and it became his. He moved to a whirling pitch, slowed and then stopped dramatically to rest and conserve while her body whimpered for him. Tantalizingly, he waited. And waited. But then, beset by love's budding fervor he moved again at a faster, more terrifying pace in the insanely happy drive toward the glorious end.

Lithe's body arched, held at a back-breaking bend, relaxed then arched anew in a fanatic struggle of reaching.

"Now!" she screamed.

"Yes!" he choked, in answer and in unity with her youthful drive.

She shrieked as her body lashed and leaped to match the new speed Mark was obtaining.

When they struck the sun and lost themselves within its blaze and fluttered downward from that sensation's peak, Mark felt the ripple of all young things throughout his body. Accomplishment, ability, health—all of love's loss and new discoveries and even the reclaiming of the missed and gapping years.

Chapter Seven

The first day back at the office following the week-end at the cottage presented Mark with a multiplicity of business problems. They filled his mind the entire day and he was glad that they did. The pressure kept him from thinking of the immediate past—of Lithe Sutton—of the things that he had feared and the regret that had come to him.

In an orderly fashion, as if nothing new had happened to his life, he faced and accomplished each of the business matters that had awaited him. It was nearly six o'clock when he shut the last folder on his desk. It was then that he heard the reception door open and close.

He pushed up from his swivel chair. But he did not have time to move around the desk and walk to the office door before he heard motion just outside it. He paused and waited. In another moment, Lithe Sutton, hair, eyes, and smile radiant, framed herself in the doorway.

"Caught you," she said joyfully. "I knew I would. I just had to."

Mark was very quiet for a second. Because he had

kept busy he had avoided thinking of the girl, but now her sudden appearance brought with it every intimate memory of her. And the memories were a confusion of enraptured pleasure and deep remorse.

"Well, say you're glad to see me," Lithe whispered throatily.

"Surprised, is a better description," Mark said. "What the devil are you doing here anyway?"

Slowly, she walked toward his desk, her hips swaying in a slow and undulating manner. "I stopped for you to buy me a cocktail."

"Cocktails?"

"Of course," she replied. "It is six o'clock, you know."

She stopped in front of the desk, placed her hands on its top and leaned forward. It was the first time that Mark had really noticed the very mature, low-cut, black dress, the mink stole, the nylon-clad legs stretching long from high-heels and the large, round, attractive but almost ridiculous hat. The image of a passionate and bare beach girl seemed very far away. Mark glanced at his watch.

"Well?" she said.

"It's five minutes to," he replied. He smiled slightly.

"Good," Lithe answered. She straightened and her breasts, although secure in what had to be an expensive undergarment, enlarged and rounded smoothly, leaving for Mark's memory alone their sharp pointed ends.

"I was just going home," Mark said.

"I know. Judy said you almost always stay an hour after the others leave—that you're nearly always here until six."

"Judy?" Mark said crossly.

"Yes, of course."

"Quite," Baxton said, gruffness circling the word. Total embarrassment grabbed at Mark's chest and clutched tightly until it became anger. He did not trust his voice to make a comment. Nor was it needed.

"Well, I have to run along, Mark," Baxton said. He only stopped to say hello. I have some guests waiting. He paused, then said, "Nice meeting you, Miss Susan." He nodded to both Lithe and Mark, turned and disappeared toward the other end of the dining room. When Mark reseated himself, Lithe leaned forward and said, "What a distinguished looking man. He must be very important."

"He is," Mark said sourly. "He's the Governor's Chairman on the new Juvenile Delinquency Committee. At the moment, Mister Baxton is my most important client."

"How nice," she said.

Mark did not answer. And he decided against ordering a new drink. He paid his bill, then, with Lithe walking ahead of him, they moved to the foyer where Mark took his hat and coat from the girl in the checking booth.

Lithe was already at the door and waiting for him when Mark saw the host raise his hand in a short beckoning signal. Mark looked at Lithe, bowed shortly to excuse himself, then walked over to the host.

"Yes, Henry, what can I do for you?" Mark asked.

"Mister Corbin," the manager said. "Mister Corbin—excuse me, please—but—well, it is very difficult for me to say but I want you to know that if it had been anyone but you—any other guest at all—I would not have allowed the young lady to be served. Our license, you know. The liquor laws, they're very strict. I hope you understand."

"I understand, Henry. I'm—I'm sorry."

The manager rolled his eyes and raised his hands and shoulders in a sad shrug. "The young lady, she is very beautiful. And you are still young, Mister Corbin. It is a shame the laws are so severe. But there are places I could suggest—less scrupulous clubs where—"

"No, Henry, that's not necessary," Mark interrupted. "Thank you. And I am sorry."

Mark turned and walked away from Henry. When he reached Lithe, he held the door open and they left the lounge.

Outside, Lithe turned to him and said, "What was that all about?"

"Something very personal."

"Oh."

Mark looked up and down the street. Then he said, "I have to get some papers from the office. I'll take you to the car first. You can wait for me there."

She took his arm again. "Don't be silly, darling. I'll come with you."

He did not resist her decision. Somehow, he knew that it would be futile. With her walking close to him they headed in the direction of the office.

The night elevator operator—an old, badly bent man—hoisted them to the floor of Mark's office. Mark unlocked the door, pushed it open, waited for Lithe to enter then entered himself and switched on the reception room light.

"I'll just be a second," he said.

"There's really no great hurry, you know."

Mark walked down the carpeted corridor, hit the light switch of his office and went immediately to his desk. He could hear the soft steps of Lithe following him. He saw her enter the room and hesitate by the

Lithe walked toward him. She took her hand from where she held the stole together. It parted. Her breasts spilled forward then bounced in definite rhythm as she walked across the room.

Although a hundred cautions raced through his mind shouting for attention, he pushed back and rose from the chair. And, even with tons of logic weighing upon him, trying for delay and reason, he moved around the desk. The feeling of Lithe's young body joined to him was all that he could remember, think of, or want.

She stopped before him, smiled and raised her hands to his shoulders, allowing the stole to fall to the floor. Then, with her voice already thick and smothering her words, she said, "If I'm to be a good mistress for you, Mark darling, I must be ~~with~~ all the time—and any place."

Mark stooped and lifted her in his arms. He held her very still for a moment before walking across the floor to the leather couch at the opposite wall. The journey was a short one. And, if its path was treacherous and later to be filled with terror Mark denied it—blocked it from his mind—in his haste to know again the overwhelming fever of love's young search.

Chapter Eight

Lithe jumped up from the couch where she was sitting with Judy Corbin and walked to the living room window of her house. She pulled the draperies apart and looked into the early evening's shadows. Then she turned back to Judy.

"No sign of them yet," she said.

Judy laughed. "I've never seen you so anxious for anyone to get here—especially Pete and Ron."

"I'm not anxious," Lithe answered. "A little restless, that's all. I have to go out later tonight." She walked back to the couch and plunked down in the deep cushions.

Judy curled her legs beneath her. Her textbook, which had been open and on her lap, fell to the floor. She looked at it, shrugged her shoulders and made no move to retrieve it.

Lithe laughed and said, "What the dickens—we've studied enough for one day anyhow."

"Sure we have," Judy agreed. She glanced to the windows. "Did you say you're going out later tonight?"

"Um, hum," Lithe said happily.

"A date?"

"A very, very, most important date," Lithe said.
"One of many I've had lately."

"Oh," Judy said.

"But it doesn't have to spoil our little swinging session tonight. I'm not leaving until quite late."

"He must be pretty important," Judy said. "I've never seen you quite so elated about a date. And you've been different lately, Lithe."

"Have I?"

"Yes. More—more floaty or something. But it becomes you."

Lithe's eyes went dreamy and she looked vaguely to the ceiling. "Yes, it does."

"Maybe you're in love," Judy offered.

"I know I am."

Judy leaned forward excitedly. "Are you really, Lithe? How wonderful."

"Oh, it is. Sometime I'll tell you all about it but right now—for a little while, I want to keep it all bottled up inside of me—not share it, not even with you, Jude."

Judy nodded understandingly. "It's nice to see someone gay. Dad's been an old bear lately."

Lithe's interest grew. "Really? That's unusual, isn't it?"

"It certainly is. And I'm worried about him."

Lithe felt a glow for the intrigue that was hers; the astounding satisfaction she found in discussing Mark, her lover, with her best friend, who happened to be the lover's daughter. It was almost too unbelievable, she thought. Almost too glorious.

"Maybe he's breaking up with Claudia," Lithe suggested.

Judy looked shocked, then said, "No, it could never be anything like that. Never."

"Who knows, maybe he has a new girl."

"Jeez, Lithe," Pete mumbled into her hair. "You're driving me crazy—being so close and everything. And why the sudden attention? You've hardly noticed me for months."

"You really don't care what the reasons are, do you?" she asked. She burrowed her breasts deeper into his chest and felt him react with a sharp intake of breath.

As they danced to the corner of the room and pivoted, Lith saw Ron Barber very close to Judy. His arm was about her shoulder. He whispered into her ear then kissed lightly at her neck and ear. She watched Judy laugh lightly and shift her position away from the boy.

Lithe thrust her hips closer to Pete, whose dancing step hesitated then went out of rhythm for a few seconds before he regained its easy glide. She remembered their double date the night of the play. She felt amusement at how she had now switched partners, made Pete the beneficiary of her charms and put Judy in the position of rebuking a new, older and more experienced boy. Thinking of it brought warmth to her and she clutched at the back of Pete's neck. But, the warmth she felt, Lithe well knew, was only the warmth of preparation. And it was not for Pete or any boy. It was for Mark Corbin whom she was to meet later.

Lithe took several minutes to recall in minute detail the first act of love they had shared. She remembered the feeling that had consumed her when she had soared then erupted for the first time in her life, finding at seventeen all that she had sought for three years, achieving with a man all that had been merely a distant promise with dozens of adolescent lovers.

Her body trembled. She shuddered and pulled even

loser to Pete. She remained very still against him a moment. Over Pete's shoulder she saw Judy with Ron's arms, submitting to a long kiss. But her hands were against his chest in a cautious, guarded pose.

Abruptly, Lithe broke away from Pete.

"Hey," he said thickly.

"Hey, yourself," she answered. "Come on, help me in the kitchen."

She hurried out of the living room, making a wide circle around the couch so as not to disturb Ron and Judy.

Following in the same path, Pete hurried after Lithe.

Lithe busied herself with ice cubes, glasses, and ginger ale, then reached high into a cupboard and withdrew a liquor bottle.

"Hey, crazy," Pete said.

She mixed four strong drinks, then she and Pete returned to the other couple.

Judy was standing by the record player and Lithe could see that her blouse was rumpled and more open at the breast. Lithe smiled. She knew that Ron's searching fingers had been there. She knew, too, that Judy had resisted the touch. But Lithe wondered how much Ron had accomplished, how far he had been permitted in his roving.

Lithe walked first to Judy. "Come on, no excitement this time. You have to take a drink. Really, you do. After all, graduation's only a few weeks away. We're adults as much as we'll ever be and a simple drink won't kill us."

"I don't think so," Judy said. She smiled weakly, a touch of sorrow in her eyes.

Lithe leaned close to Judy's ear and whispered, "Come on, Jude. Don't be a prude. I made yours very

ow you, Pete." She raised his hand and sneaked
side her blouse and felt his fingers pinch hard at
east.

"Geezus," he exclaimed. He clutched harder t
rked her to him.

Lithe opened her mouth and plunged all of
ngue deeply between Pete's lips. She felt him j
old her closer, stagger a bit, respond to her ton
ith his own, then, half-forcing, half-falling, crum
the love seat pulling her down with him.

She brought her mouth free. Then, calmly
aned back and undid all of the buttons of her blo
nd unsnapped her bra. She pulled it from her bod

Pete groaned and lowered to the fleshy gift.

Lithe locked her fingers into Pete's hair and ar
er breasts upward. She thought of Mark, how she
oing this very thing for him—for herself, too, a
eir great love—as she filled herself with grow
assion.

Pete yanked at the waistband of Lithe's pa
Geezus, Lithe, I can't stand it any more. Take th
amn things off. You've got them on all the ti
itely."

She laughed and said, "Oh, no, Pete. Not for y
uppy-boy. Not in your life. You're only the—
lad—maybe just the cocktail."

Bewildered, he raised his head and looked at h
What?"

She pushed a bit away from him. "I mean, pup
oy, that you're not the main dish."

"Stop calling me that, damn it," he said angr
stop it and let me—please let me have you."

"Oh, no, baby. I'm not for you—not any more th
hat you've had."

"You did once," he pleaded.

She pushed up to a full sitting position. "And w

a mistake that was. You goofed. You acted like a baby. You could *never* be a man."

Fiercely, he lunged at her. "I'll show you what a man I am." He grabbed to pull her close but only reached her breasts. He curled to them again. She allowed it. As Pete moved more desperately, working frantically to ignite her, Lithe gave her attention to Judy and Ron in the next room. She listened intently, heard a shuffle of movement then Judy's quick words of rejection. Lithe visualized Judy, quickly and determinedly, moving away from the panting Ron. Lithe knew that he had been unsuccessful in his seductive attempts.

She allowed Pete a few more minutes pleasure, even scooted down in the love seat in order to brush herself against his trembling body. Then, when his endurance seemed at an end, she pushed at his shoulders and jumped away.

"Please—please!" he cried. "You just have to. Lithe."

"I don't have to do a thing," she said coldly. She looked at the door that led to the living room. Then she smiled and said, "But maybe I will. Pete I *can* might let you have me again someday. Maybe I will. Maybe I'm kind of saving you, Pete."

She jumped up and quickly reclaimed and straightened her clothing. She walked into the living room while Pete was still pulling himself upward from the love seat.

Ron and Judy were as she had expected. Ron sat in a corner of the couch, crushed, a dark scowl upon his face. Judy was in a chair opposite him. Her clothes were in order. Her virginity, Lithe knew, was also in order. Judy wore a bright smile, her eyes twinkling with delight for the sad and uncomfortable plight of Ron.

Chapter Nine

It was dark at the pool except for the circle of light cast by the full moon.

There was a splash. Then quiet. Then a splashing noise again near the pool's end.

Mark's head broke above the water and he began an easy stroke toward the end of the pool. He heard Claudia swimming behind him. When his outstretched hand struck the tile, he grasped it and waited, breathing deeply. In a moment Claudia glided next to him

"Pretty good," he said. "But not good enough."

"It's the story of my life," she said, breathing hard. "I'm a born loser."

"Going back, or up?" he asked.

"Up."

"Good. You save me from showing-off again."

He braced his hands at the top of the pool, boosted himself upward and twisted his body to rest on the edge. He reached down and hoisted Claudia up and next to him. He watched as she snapped off her bathing cap and shook her head, making the hair ends glimmer. He felt, rather than saw, her good body outlined in a low-cut, black swimsuit, and he remem-

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bered Lithe's bikini and thought of how sharply the garments contrasted, as did the women. Then he corrected his thinking, deciding that there was not, nor ever could be, a true comparison made between Lithe and Claudia. They were women apart and it was for that very reason that comparison was impossible. One was not a woman, only a very young girl despite her worldliness, passion and responsiveness.

"Are you considering a coronary after all the exercise?" Claudia said, turning and looking at him.

"No," he smiled. "At least I don't think so. Why?"

"The somberness. The quiet. But then, I should be used to it by now."

"Sorry."

"Will you *please* stop saying that," Claudia said irritably. "You use that word all the time lately—as if you're in a constant state of apology for something."

"Oh," he said. Then deliberately, "Sorry."

Claudia's irritation disappeared before her laughter.

Mark smiled, then placed his hands far behind his back and stretched his waist and chest high, arching from his sitting position.

"Bad day, today?" she asked.

"The usual. Bad enough though, I suppose."

Claudia was quiet a second, then said, "Mark—truly, I'm concerned about you. Judy is, too."

"Judy?" Apprehension spiked the word. Quickly, he broke his arched position and looked at Claudia.

"Yes," Claudia replied.

"What's she concerned about?" Mark asked, feeling defensive and worried.

"About your moodiness lately, Mark. And I'm concerned, too. Judy's sure you're ill. I'm beginning to wonder about it myself."

He turned his head and looked down the length of

pool. "I'm not ill. Not at all. Neither of you should worry about me."

"Maybe we can't help it. We both love you, you know."

"I know."

Purposely, Claudia turned her voice gay and said, "What about a drink?"

"Words of wisdom," he said.

"Coming right up." She jumped to her feet. "You're robe's by the mats. Why don't you lie down and take it easy?"

He smiled up at her. "Such solicitude."

"Sorry," she said

"There you go apologizing again," he said laughing.

She laughed, too, then walked quickly toward the lighted patio at the back of her house.

Mark watched her dark shadow move. When it merged with a patch of darkness it seemed as if she had truly vanished. He wondered at the sadness he would know if ever Claudia did disappear from his life, leave it, and him, and Judy. It seemed impossible. And, unbearable.

Again he stretched, then finally lowered to his back. The tile was cool on his wet skin and he felt a slight chill. But he did not move. And he wondered at his passivity, at the quietness that was with him as he waited for Claudia. He could not determine if it was from comfort, from the security of her nearness, or, merely true fatigue.

He thought of his opposite feelings when he was with Lithe Sutton. He remembered each strong drive, every muscle tensing when he was nakedly a part of her.

Mark turned a bit to better listen for Claudia's return. When he heard no sound he again thought of

Lithe. There was no recollection for the activity of their bodies together. There was only the heavy worry Lithe had begun to cause him. Only the previous night, Mark, filled with logic but still in a state of ambivalence as to the drives of mind and body, attempted again to end their relationship. He had been unsuccessful. Lithe, first tearfully proclaiming her love for him, then coldly threatening dangerous disclosures to Judy, deterred him. But, only minutes later he joined in the resealing of their affair and its future with more heated lovemaking.

Yet, with it all, there was the worry for Lithe's influence over Judy, for the awesome ability Lithe had to return the girl to the dark shadows of emotional illness. Mark knew that it could be accomplished with only a few words. A simple review of his affair with Lithe would do the horrible task, would undoubtedly place Judy where she had been before Lithe came on the scene.

Mark shook his head. The mental image of his unhappy daughter was more than he could endure. But the image persisted and even took on more rightful dimensions when he considered that Lithe could even destroy friendship's origin for Judy. All he had to do was tell Judy that she had never had a real interest in her, that she had initiated their friendship for the sole purpose of getting to know the father. And, Lithe was capable of such destruction.

Mark pushed up, raised his knees and clasped them tightly with his arms. He waited another moment then pushed to his feet. Slowly, he walked through the darkness toward the patio. He reached it just as Claudia came out of the house. She was dressed in a long robe and carried a tray holding glasses and a small silver shaker.

"Just in time," she said merrily.

"I sensed the impending glow of alcohol."

"Relax and sense it a little closer. Here." She handed him a glass.

He took it, then settled on the rubber mat that was placed in the middle of the patio floor. In a moment, Claudia joined him, sitting on the same mat and close enough that their shoulders touched.

The scent of her came to him as it always did, but, instead of creating expectations as it once did, it now produced memories of their many times together. And they were happy times, Mark thought. Then he wondered why he thought of them in the past tense.

Claudia and Mark were very quiet as they drank. The night was warm. Their place on the patio had become partly touched with the light from the moon, centering them in a half-shadow.

Mark put his empty glass down just as Claudia turned her head. Their faces brushed lightly. They both smiled, then kissed slowly, only their mouths meeting as their bodies remained parted and restrained. They separated, smiled again, then wordlessly, each taking a signal from the other's expression they undressed. Mark shoved his trunks to his feet and kicked them away from him. Claudia released the belt of her robe and let it fall at her feet. She was nude.

A shyness came to her and she said softly, "I was afraid I was just being optimistic. It's—it's been a long time, Mark."

For an answer he took her in his arms, pulled her close and lengthened himself against her as her body extended to meet him.

They kissed again, more fervently this time as their bodies curled and wrapped to each other.

Claudia moved back and Mark . . .
all of them deeply imbedded

5

Chapter Ten

Lithe's heels clicked on the tiled floor of the empty lobby. She felt a breathlessness at her chest and knew that it was not only from her hurried pace to Mark's office building. It was from a new excitement that had been brought to her. It originated with Mark's phone call—reckless in midafternoon when her mother could have been home. But, that recklessness had thrilled her as much as his request to see her as soon as possible. Although his voice had been stern, Lithe knew that he was only trying to deny the urgency of need he felt for her. And she felt the same need, had felt it for the several days since she had last been with him.

Midway across the lobby she forced herself to a slower pace. She wanted to bring a semblance of calmness to her body before she arrived at Mark's office. Her heart skipped a beat, thinking that she only wanted quiet about her so that it could be disrupted, made wild and flinging by the strong lust of her love. She paused before the bank of elevators and she looked around. There was no one in sight. At her right she saw the large glass window of a travel agency, then next to it the window of a smart men's shop.

"Yes, I am," she answered. "How nice of you to remember."

"Ah, it's nothing. We get kinda trained to people and the floors they go to. Especially at night—not too many visitors at night. Will you sign the night register, please, Miss?" the old man asked.

"Certainly. Sorry, I always forget." Lithe moved to the large, open book that was placed upon a high stool next to the operator. She bent over and signed it.

"Thanks, Miss," he said.

"Of course."

Lithe smiled as the doors slid shut and the floor jerked slightly as they began their upward movement. She thought of height, how some people feared it and how she welcomed it, especially the height of love she knew with Mark. She felt her nipples harden and extend as if they had met a sudden chill. But there was no chill. There was heat, a sensual inferno of heat at her thighs.

walked toward him. "My, but this is a professional greeting. You make me feel like a client."

She watched his face for change, for some amusement or joy or the old desire to come to it. There was only the darkness of him, his burning eyes, the steady, severe expression of his face.

Lithe ignored the chair and walked around the desk. She stopped before Mark, reached up and straightened his tie, then let her hands rest gently on his chest.

"Sit down, Lithe," he said again.

"Darling—you're so—so cross. What's the matter?"

"Sit down."

Lithe withdrew her hands. Something in his tone made her hesitate. Again, her mind raced, seeking a clue to Mark's quiet anger—for the difference that had come to him since the time of his telephone call. Then, she wondered if perhaps anger, not passion, had motivated the call.

She turned, walked back to the chair, and sat down. Mark settled behind his desk and swiveled around so that he faced her. Again, Lithe had the memory of sitting at her high school counselor's desk. She wondered why this insisted upon intruding into her present like an obscure ghost bent upon past experience. But then it was forgotten as an even more recent memory came to her with its gleaming force for the first time. There had been another desk in her life. Her father's. And she recalled sitting at it or playing there. Then one day, the desk was gone. The father was gone. The happiness was gone. And Lithe could not identify the confusion that followed: the constant moving, new schools, new children, new stepfathers.

Mark laced his fingers together in front of his waist. He remained silent.

Lithe felt an urge to hurry and speak, stop whatever horrible thing it was that Mark was about to say. But caution stayed her, made her remain quiet.

There was a slight tremor in Mark's voice when he said, "Lithe—this—our affair has ended. It's over."

Lithe felt relieved. She had already heard the same thing from him before and always, before their time together was over, there had been an abrupt end made to his resolves and a new, stronger bond established between them.

She smiled, leaned forward, and was about to speak when Mark said, "What you've been doing to Judy is rotten and filthy—the most despicable thing imaginable. What I've been a part of with you is the same thing."

Lithe felt an instant's shock. But she recovered quickly. Her eyebrows arched high in feigned wonder. "What *I've* been doing to Judy?"

"Yes."

Lithe remembered the clash of her body with Judy and wondered if perhaps Mark had learned of the event, if it was this that had created his new determination to end their love affair.

Somewhat indignantly, she said, "I've done nothing to Judy."

Mark shook his head. "Maybe the worst part of it is that you don't realize what it is that you *are* doing." He paused, looked more closely at her and shook his head sadly.

Lithe edged forward on the chair. Her skirt hiked several inches above her knees. She hoped Mark noticed them.

He did. Then quickly looked into her eyes again, shouting a new denunciation. "Why couldn't you just leave Judy alone? Why has it been so goddamn im-

portant to make her like you—turn her into the same kind of little slut that you are?”

Lithe felt a chill. This was the first real obscenity she had ever heard from Mark. And it had been directed at her.

“I’ve done nothing,” she said. “I haven’t—”

“Stop denying it,” Mark shouted. He leaned forward, gripped his knees as if in a determined effort to keep his body from leaping at her with a vengeance that could destroy.

Lithe’s legs began to tremble. To keep it from growth and claiming her entire body, she settled back into the chair.

“Listen to me, Lithe,” Mark said, more calmly, but still filled with bitterness. “Listen to me very well and never forget it. You leave Judy alone. Leave her alone or I’ll—I’ll—” His sentence broke off as if its end was to be a commitment that was too frightening for him to consider.

Lithe took it to mean indecision. “Mark—darling, aren’t you being rather—”

“Shut up,” he interrupted. “Don’t lie—don’t deny what you’ve been doing. I know the whole story. The whole rotten, filthy, stinking, miserable story.”

“What story?” she asked quietly.

He breathed deeply, as if he were seeking to rid his chest of pain, then he said, “I had a telephone call. It was from the father of one of your friends—one of the kids who was at the park with you the other night.” He paused. A half-smile, bitter and hard, cracked at the corners of his mouth. “This man was pretty upset about you kids. Thought I should know about the—about the nude bathing you and my daughter and the boys were involved in. He thought I should know about the drinking, too, and about the—the heavy

petting that was going on. About you flat on your back on the beach with a boy—both of you naked and—and heaven knows how Judy was involved—how much involved she is by now with someone and—”

“Darling,” Lithe drawled, a smile of satisfaction brightening her features. “You’re jealous—but darling, there’s no need for you to be jealous—I only use the boys to—”

“Will you please shut up and understand what I’m trying to tell you—understand that you have to leave Judy alone—understand what you don’t seem to be able to get through that sex-filled head. That we’re through—that it never should have started and that I curse the day it did. That I’m even more to blame than you—that I’m rotten and filthy and wrong but at least my part in this insanity is over. I mean it! And if you ever influence Judy—push her toward anything again—well, don’t, Lithe. Just don’t.”

She felt a flush of heat and it was different than the familiar heat of love and readiness. Her flush was of fear. Terror clutched her heart, stabbed hard at the realization that Mark was sincere and not to be derided. And, because she was afraid, because loss was near, anger came to her as a defensive shield to stop rejection and sorrow, balance it, then reverse it in an attack of her own.

She jumped up from the chair and shouted, “Don’t worry about Judy. She’s still the precious little virgin you raised her to be—still precious and sweet and untouched by human—” She stopped, rejected vulgarity, then lower and more intensely continued, “No, Judy hasn’t been had yet. Not yet. Believe me, I’d be the first to know—so while you’ve been having your ticks with me she’s followed your motto of purity. Oh, Jesus, how funny you are.”

Lithe saw a few lines smooth away from Mark’s

worried brow. She knew that until that very moment—until she had told him—Mark had had his doubts about Judy. A feeling of confidence came to her. The impending shock of loss that she had felt a few moments before was gone. And, as dozens of thoughts raced through her mind it became clear to her that she need not lose Mark—that she would not lose him and all he had brought to her life. She felt triumphant.

More calmly, as if he wanted to undo the damage of anger, Mark said, "Lithe—you can have a good life—the kind you should have with a boy who will love you. All of this can be forgotten—can be left behind and you can be—"

"Don't talk hearts and flowers to me," she said, suddenly desiring nothing so much as to stop his flow of solicitous words. Then, her new feeling of confidence made her move. She walked close to Mark, looked up at him and smiled, wide and sexual but with a new curl of cruelty in her expression.

"You're not quitting me like this, Mark," she said. "It's not that easy. I'm yours. I always will be. I'm your mistress until you're too old to have one."

She looked into his eyes another moment and saw the new fear born. Then she turned and walked out of the office.

Chapter Eleven

As soon as he sat down in the l his throat tighten and restrict hi ed by the Juvenile Delinquency C wondering about the urgent ca ton at once. Mark breathed c tness did not leave him. It wa v, by apprehension caused by the e of his client only an hour earlier k settled more deeply into the sooner attained a lessenin the door at the end of Then he stood up as he Baxton approaching.

Hello, Mark. Good of y," Baxton said.

hey shook hands and M e on Baxton's face.

Glad to come right ove ing's wrong with the c e—well, upset."

axton looked at Mark ar place behind the desk an

"I am upset," Baxton said. He brought his hand to the desk top and joined his fingers tip to tip.

"Better tell me about it," Mark said.

"I intend to. That's why I asked to see you." He paused and glanced down at his hands. Then he raised his eyes and said, "Mark - I'm sorry - terribly sorry, but I have to take the JD account away from you."

Mark was silent a moment and he wondered if he assumed quiet in order to withstand the shock of his client's announcement. Then he wondered if this was what he had really expected, if deep within his being he had sensed his dismissal as the reason for his long afternoon summons.

"I am sorry, Mark. I want you to know that. We've been more than pleased with your work - actually, the Governor himself was delighted with the copy for next month."

"Then, why?" Mark asked.

Baxton glanced at his fingers again, avoiding for as long as possible, it appeared, any renewed contact with Mark's eyes.

Mark drew more erect in his chair. "It's for some reason other than our work, is that it?"

"Yes." He sighed heavily. He raised his eyes. "You're dismissed from the account because of some personal things, Mark. Some very personal reasons, which I'm sure you'll agree are sufficient to keep you out of the JD picture."

A spark of hope touched at Mark. Politics, he thought. It was a common thing. The Governor has a friend - perhaps a relative - someone who can benefit from the account, Patronage - it was as old as time and nothing for which he should feel guilt.

But his hope died quickly when Baxton said, "Your personal involvement with - some lady - child, really makes it - well, it -"

for you to be associated with JD, Mark." He shook his head in an unbelieving gesture.

The full force of his guilt struck Mark now and twisted his insides into a tight ball of shame and regret. He was very quiet for what seemed like a long time. And Baxton was quiet, too, as if he had also endured some of the very shock and shame that Mark felt.

Finally, Mark looked across the desk at the older man and said, "I'm—I'm not involved now."

"But you were?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, Mark."

"Yes. I'm sorry, too, Mister Baxton."

"You see, Mark, even if the story were totally false—even if it was an elaborate fantasy of the girl's—even if she—"

"The girl," Mark interrupted. "She told you? Lithe Sutton said something to you?"

He nodded. "She called on me. She had quite a bit to say. That she was seduced by you, that you've forced her to continue an affair." He shook his head again. "I understand she's your daughter's best friend and— Oh, damn it, Mark, why in the hell did it have to happen?"

"I—I don't know," he answered. "Perhaps if I explained, you—"

"No, Mark. Really, I don't want to know the details. Perhaps the story isn't entirely accurate—as a matter of fact, I doubt that it is—but you don't deny that you've had an affair with the girl."

"No, I don't deny it."

Baxton raised his hands helplessly then let them drop to the desk. "So—there's nothing we can do, Mark. It's a damn shame. And I know how much the account has meant to you. And certainly not because

The thought of his daughter brought the tightness to his chest again. He thought of the audacity of Lithe's call upon Baxton. Then he wondered if she had already told Judy—or planned to tell her, in a distorted manner, of their affair. But Mark knew, too, that distortion was not necessary. The truth alone could be shattering to Judy. Then he stopped thinking about it. It was too grotesque, too threatening for him to even consider.

As if motion would subdue thought, the gross worry, he turned and joined the crowd hurrying along the sidewalk. He stopped at the corner, glanced around, then entered a small bar.

Inside, Mark accustomed his eyes to the dark, then moved to the far end of the bar and slid onto a stool. He looked around, saw people at the bar, at the tables behind him, all of them in the dark.

Listlessly, the bartender took his order then brought him a double-scutch. Mark mixed it in the tall glass of water, spilling a bit of it over the side of the shot glass.

"Pretty wasteful there, friend," a nearby girl's voice said.

"Yes," Mark answered without looking at her. He took half of the drink in a long swallow.

"So, even when you get a generous sized drink it's wasted anyway," the voice continued.

Mark looked down the bar to the girl who was seated two empty spaces away from him. He was astonished by her youthfulness and bewildered by her voice which was low and husky, decades more mature than her appearance. It seemed impossible that the voice belonged to the girl and for a moment he had the most fantastic notion that perhaps some trick had been played upon him. Or, that he had tricked himself by associating the voice with the girl.

looking for the same thing today. If we are, well, I have a place of my own. I'm kind of—well, between things right now and I'm not as expensive as usual and—"

"How old are you?" Mark asked suddenly.

She registered surprise, then glanced down the bar. She turned to Mark and said, "Old enough."

"How old?"

"You a cop?"

"No."

She looked behind her, then said, "Is this important—how old I am; I mean?"

"Not really."

She deliberated a moment, then very slowly and smiling wide and suddenly very hungrily, she said, "I'm eighteen. You should like that. All the middle-aged ones seem to like the young ones."

Mark took a very long gulp of his drink, then he said, "Not this one."

"Wanta bet?"

"No. You'd lose."

"I could be mighty nice to you."

"No doubt. But no thanks."

She put her hand on his forearm and pressured with her fingers. "Please. I feel as if this would be something more than business tonight."

"No thanks."

The fingers crept lower, touching the softness of his thigh. "Are you sure?"

"Very sure."

She withdrew her hand and moved back a few inches. Then, despondently, but from a despondence that Mark knew would only last until she met the next man, she said, "Okay. If that's the way you want it."

She turned and walked down the length of bar to

the door, her hips swaying, beckoning, crying of need and sorrow.

Mark watched her leave. Then he finished his drink, wondering what desire had prompted his affair with Lithe, that had been absent with others, what strange, twisted thing was it that tossed him into the delirium of an affair with her.

He ordered another drink and drank it quickly.

By six o'clock the bar had become very crowded and people jammed behind Mark, laughing, talking and reaching their hands past him to grab their drinks. Fuzziness had formed about Mark's thinking as if all thoughts he created were purposely unclear so that he could not dwell at length upon them.

The bar, the people, the drinks, suddenly became unbearable. Mark arose and pushed away from the barstool. Immediately, his seat was taken by an enormous man. Mark moved a few feet away and wondered how the man would ever manage the small stool—or—better, how could the stool manage the man. Mark laughed and noticed that he was unsteady on his feet.

He squeezed through the standing customers and walked to the washroom. When he came out he felt fresher and headed out the front door.

He decided that delay only made things more difficult. So, he walked in the direction of his office, prepared to do the things that were necessary to end his responsibility for the JD account.

The yellow light above the bank of elevators signified that a slow descent was being made from the thirtieth floor. He turned and saw one of the porters pushing a cart into the freight elevator. He moved to it and joined the man.

At his office door he fumbled with his keys and cursed himself for being so clumsy with something so

familiar. Then he wondered if it was that way with people, too. And he recalled that he had become self-conscious and clumsy with Judy and Claudia; the best known, most loved people of his life.

He pushed open the door, clicked the light switch and waited as the fluorescent brightness sparked alive. Then he walked to his office and went immediately to his desk. He clicked the single desk light on and sat down, thinking that it seemed right that he should work alone in his office, solemn and unhappy, destitute of meaningful work.

When he reached for some papers high on the desk he again felt fuzzy and knew that it was from his eyes, from looking past the light to the far, dark wall of the office. For a moment he stared, feeling as if he were looking directly into the lens of a motion picture machine, blinded by it but in some extraordinary way also seeing the figure on the screen. And the figure moved, stood up from the couch and came closer.

It was Lithe.

Mark's body stiffened, then slackened back into his chair. When she stopped in front of his desk, he glared at her. "How the hell did you get here?"

She smiled. But he noticed that it was different, as if the eyes were tormented.

"Simple, darling," she said. "A nice, old man with beautiful suspenders used a pass key for me." Lithe leaned forward. Mark saw the flesh of her breasts bulge above the blouse's neckline. For a moment, it seemed to him that her breasts were smaller, as if they had lost their bloat of passion. But her mouth, its vividness made pale by the desk light, was wide and more hungry looking than Mark thought it possible for a mouth to be.

She peeped her tongue from between her lips, whisked it back and forth a moment, then withdrew it

nd said, "What's the matter, darling? You don't seem pleased to see me."

"I'm not," he answered wearily. Alcohol crowded within his body and his voice sounded strange to him for he had expected all of his anger to boil and change the sounds of his words.

Lithe straightened. "You look as if you've had a bad day, darling."

"I have. As you probably damn well know." Suddenly, he stood up and braced his hands on the desk top. "As you goddamn well *do* know. Just as you know that you're not suppose to be here—that I don't want you here—that you're out of my life. So you can turn around and get the devil out of my office."

Her shoulders squared a little as if she physically felt the words and the hurt they caused.

He moved around the desk and went quickly to the door. He switched on the overhead lights. But the only change that the full light brought to Lithe was to outline her body in very sharp detail.

She turned and faced Mark. "I guess you must have had a talk with Mister Baxton today."

"What you guess doesn't mean a damn to me."

"How sad," she said seductively. She moved a few steps in his direction.

Mark pushed the office door open more widely. "You're headed the right way. Just keep going."

She seemed to ignore his words. Then she stopped and her expression changed, went dark and mean.

"Don't put on a cold act with me, Mark," she said. "Don't try it. If you saw Baxton—and I know you did—then you know that he was just a warning—a warning of what I can do to you, Mark. To you and Judy and—and everyone who has anything to do with you."

"It doesn't matter what you do any more. Just leave."

Her eyes changed, went from sadness to anger to fear. She hurried across the room and stopped inches from him.

"Stop it, Mark. Stop it, darling. Don't say those things—don't shut doors that we can't open again. I can't stand it—that tone of voice—as if I'm nothing to you—as if you're leaving me—deserting me—"

"I've already left you, Lithe," he said. "And you're leaving, too. Now." He pointed to the door.

"No, no, please, Mark," she pleaded. "You can't just leave me. *Desert* me!" The words choked in her throat and she stopped, as if some long ago memory had come to her—a memory of equal sadness and fright.

Her sudden emphasis of the word "desert," the way it choked her and made her eyes go wide, made Mark remember stories of the girl's life, how her father had vanished when she was very young. He wondered if this had been beginning of trouble for her.

Softer, and much more kindly, Mark said, "Just leave, Lithe."

Her body seemed to grow taller: shoulders squaring, breasts pushing forward, arms outstretched at her side with fingers knotted into small, mad fists.

"No," she spat angrily. She breathed deeply, then in a carefully controlled tone that brought all the wanting to her words again, she said, "You don't mean it, Mark. You can't mean it because you can't do without me now that you've had me." She paused, "And it can be so simple—so nice for us." A pause again, then more desperately, "You can even marry Claudia—and—and I can go on being Judy's friend. Don't you see how simple and nice and beautiful it can be for us?"

Mark felt sickness at the pit of his stomach and a taste of liquor came to his mouth again. But the revulsion was not alone for Lithe. It was for himself, for,

even as she suggested and pushed for an incredible intrigue, he knew that it was no different—indeed, was the same intrigue that he had already helped create.

He took the single step toward her, then, solicitously, touched at her elbow to lead her out of the office.

She shook his hand loose and yelled horribly, "No, goddamn it—it's not this easy for you—it's not going to be this easy for you to leave me again."

"Again?" he asked bewilderedly. "Again?" He searched her eyes for some clue to her subconscious meaning. But there was nothing that he could see, nothing that he could hope to understand. And, if the sudden slip had interrupted Lithe, made her recall a fragment of the past, she disclaimed it with her hot and angry eyes, her excited breathing, the wantonness of her body.

She threw herself against Mark and grasped at his shoulders. He hesitated, then pushed at her forearms, disentangling her for a moment. But immediately she dashed herself to him again. Now, there was no clinging. There was only the strong, deliberate attempt at creating excitement, using her body as an implement of promise and thrill so as to thwart Mark's rejection.

Feverishly, her hands slipped inside his jacket, then within his shirt to rub and touch at his chest, madly, as if touch alone would keep them together, keep alive their relationship. She thrust her hips to his body, held them there, waiting it seemed, for her heat to reach him, fire him, move him to a violent taking of her.

Mark felt her touch, momentarily mixed it with the alcohol looseness that was still with him and remembered what it had been like with them: their

crush of bodies, their steam, their slow experimentation of new techniques, new ways to achieve greater heat.

He stepped back from her hot hands and bent slightly to look into her eyes as he gripped her forearms and held her away from him.

"Stop it, Lithe," he said. "Stop it—stop this—this horrible waste of yourself."

"No, no, no,—no!" She pushed hard against his hands like a resistant football guard.

"Stop it!"

Her body relaxed a bit. She stepped back. Then, because she recognized the failure of her body to arouse him, she looked for another means. She grabbed at her blouse and pulled it apart as the cloth tore and buttons ripped away from the material. Then she yanked her bra away and let it fall beneath her suddenly popping breasts.

She lifted her heavy breasts, cupping them and presenting them with upturned palms. She took a step toward Mark, then said, "You can't quit me, Mark, because you can't do without me—without this." She squeezed and thrust and her nipples extended to greater length. Although she breathed heavily her breath seemed to catch in her throat as if stifled by new, exciting thoughts.

"Lithe, Lithe, Lithe, don't do this to yourself," Mark said, shaking his head slowly from side to side.

"To myself?" She stopped, then, puzzled, said again, "Myself?"

"Don't, Lithe."

"But nothing's for just myself, darling, everything is for you—for us." Madly, she flung herself to him again.

Mark remained unmoving, testing whether or not her bare breasts stabbing at his chest, her warm thighs

upward to grip at his waist in a frantic searching to find him. Her nails clawed, burrowed, dug, then worked panic-stricken at his belt. Madly, she hooked her fingers around the leather and pulled her head level, like a strained effort on a chinning bar.

Mark leaped away and Lithe fell forward, catching the floor with her hands. She remained quiet, propped on hands and knees, her breasts hanging downward, all of her bent to the total position of humiliation.

Finally, and slowly, she raised her head.

Mark saw stark depravity in her eyes and it made a shudder. He felt like screaming to some unknown power to shake her from her position. He hoped that she would even yell and shout—~~something~~—but hold her frightful pose. He wanted to

go to her, lift her to her feet and force health to her with words of kindness. But he knew he could not. A touch to Lithe now would mean other things. So, he only waited silently for some move from Lithe that would mark the end of the hysteria—the end of their relationship.

At last, an eternity for Mark while he stared at her, Lithe crumbled her body to a sitting position. Then she arose and stood very straight. She adjusted her clothing and walked to the couch and snatched up her stole. She tossed it around her shoulders and walked to the door.

For a moment it seemed that she would leave without another word. But that moment passed. Mark wished it had not. She turned and looked at him. Now, there was no bewilderment in her eyes. They blazed with full-blown hate.

"I can't really be left behind again," she said. "And I won't be. Not without first making you so sorry you'll wish you were dead." She hesitated, looked at him once more, and turned. Then she was gone.

Mark stared at the empty doorway, still feeling the awful loathing of her eyes. It seemed he would never be able to forget it.

Chapter Twelve

Only the night lights shown in the large window of the beauty salon as Mark walked toward the front entrance. A single sketch of a woman's head backed by plush orange draperies was the only window adornment. In its simplicity it seemed exclusive and rich.

The carpeted foyer was dark. Mark paused and caught all the chemical scents then he turned and walked into the room and to the small, lighted office on the side.

Claudia was bent over an enormous ledger book. Her hair was slightly ruffled and dark framed glasses were perched on the tip of her nose.

She looked up as Mark entered.

"Hi," he said wearily.

"Hello, Mark," Claudia answered solemnly. She closed the book.

"Closing the ledger, eh?" he asked.

"For now."

"Not to be reopened?"

She hesitated, then said, "I don't know."

He walked to the chair next to her small desk and let his body sag tiredly into its patterned fullness. He watched Claudia as she removed her glasses and he noticed that there was pinkness at her eyes. He wondered if it was from the effect of the seldom worn glasses.

"Thanks for seeing me," he said.

"Your call kind of hooked me, you know." She paused and forced a smile, then said, "After all, what girl could resist that kind of an opening—you tell me you're a cheat and that we're through then say you'll come over and tell me all about it."

Mark laughed sadly and said, "Sorry. It was a little blunt, I guess. But it seemed the best way."

She leaned forward. "What are you sorry about, Mark?"

"It's a long—very sad—very distasteful, disgusting story, but I don't want another day to pass without telling you everything I've been involved in—all the dirt—all the smut and perverse—"

"You don't have to tell me," she interrupted. She looked away from him.

"Yes, I do. You deserve to know."

"It's not necessary, Mark. I—I already know. Everything. Lithe Sutton paid me a call this afternoon."

His body seemed to shrivel and sink lower into the cushions of the chair.

She turned her head quickly and looked at him again. "So you see, you don't have any explaining to do, Mark. None at all. It's all been told and to go over it again—to review it—well, it would just be cruel and a little sadistic, I think."

"Yes, it would," he said, his voice very low, coming it seemed, from the lowest depths of the chair rather than from his throat.

Claudia smiled wanly and although it was constrictive it brought a little better feeling to Mark. His eye went from Claudia's face to her rounded breasts pushing outward in a thin blouse and it was new cause for unhappiness as he remembered the touch of them and thought that he would never know that closeness of Claudia again.

"I'm glad that you wanted to tell me, Mark," Claudia said. "I'm glad that you're not trying to justify what you did—even rationalize it—I'm glad that you thought enough of me to come and tell me without knowing that Lithe had already been here."

"I knew that she might see you," he said honestly. "But I still wanted to tell you. Even if I knew she'd never utter a word, I'd have to tell you."

"Yes you would," she said. Then, almost fearfully she asked, "What about Judy?"

"Nothing. Everything's the same as far as I know. I haven't said a word."

Claudia's body tensed and she leaned forward. "You mean you haven't forbidden her to see Lithe? To be with her. After—after all this, you're permitting the friendship to continue?"

Mark shifted his position and said, "I haven't much choice, Claudia. If I suddenly made her break with Lithe, she'd probably get very ill. If I told her the reason, the same thing would happen to her."

"Yes, I know what you mean," Claudia said, nodding.

"And besides," Mark continued. "Graduation's so close, then with that over Judy will be at the cottage for the summer. In the autumn, there's college. I've thought—I've hoped that her friendship with Lithe will just kind of fade until its not so important. And even with all that she's done already, there is a chance Lithe won't tell Judy about me." He paused, then:

unbelievably shook his head and said, "Geezus—what a mess."

Claudia nodded again, then as if the full impact of all that had happened suddenly came to her she clutched her fists and brought them to her mouth. Her body shook. Then she jumped up and slammed one hand down on her desk and cried, "Oh, Mark—how could you? How could you become so infatuated—so ridiculous—oh, god but I feel miserable." She spread her hands on the desk and looked downward.

Mark pushed up from the chair and took three long strides to Claudia. He took her by the shoulders and tried to turn her from the head-bent, shoulder-slumped position of despair she had attained.

"Please, Mark, don't," she said without looking at him.

"Claudia—if—if you could just try and—"

"I don't think I can. I want to—believe me, I do. I want to understand and be the most liberal, open-minded woman in the world, and I want to overlook what you've done—to me and to Judy—even forget what you've done to that poor, wretched girl, Lithe. I want to, but—"

"Claudia, look at me," he said. He pressured at her shoulders and turned her to face him.

Tears gathered and veiled her eyes then spilled from the corners and ran a ragged line down her cheeks. But she faced him fully and, to Mark, it seemed noble and brave that she could look at him, unashamed of the tears that he had created.

"Claudia—I don't have any excuse. I won't give any or make up a lot of reasons for what's happened. But you must know—you can't help knowing that I love you—that I want you—that I always have, and always will."

She lowered her eyes then, and very softly said, "I know it, Mark, but I don't know if it helps any more."

Mark released his hold on her. His hands dropped helplessly to his side. "And there's nothing I can do. There's no way I can convince you." He started to say more, then stopped. He, too, lowered his eyes and matched Claudia's expression of sorrowful conviction.

Very soon, Mark raised his head. Then, without looking again at Claudia he walked to the door, paused, thinking how tragedy always requires whether it was meant for another moment of suffering or to prevent the next moment that would finalize all of the previous regret. He turned and looked at Claudia. She was standing erect and

and their mouths met in a long, hard kiss, made harder than ever before because of the threat of recent parting.

Finally, still jammed together they moved the few steps to a chair. Then, with a gasp of desire that broke their kiss Mark lowered Claudia to the deep cushions.

They met swiftly, unmindful of clothing—hating it, but too mad with desire to lose time throwing it from their bodies.

With his knees braced on the chair's edge, with Claudia's body thrashing upward, ever higher in its reaching for him, Mark poured himself to the love of Claudia, to the forgetting of one and the reacceptance of another in a love that was mature and true and lasting.

And, as their bodies grew more frantic, as their hands implored and grasped and knotted in fists made tight by lust's approaching end, Mark felt a new height of love, one previously unattainable but now ready for his taking. And he knew it was because of a deep love between them.

The sound of Claudia's cries screeched in Mark's ears, shot through his brain as they grew louder and more piercing and mixed with his own heavy gasp as they arrived, paused, then dashed their bodies together in a final, happy effort of body freedom and the release it caused.

It was very late when they left Claudia's office. As if to seal again all that had been decided between them, nakedly and more slowly, their bodies had come together again in a less desperate, more painstaking and practised manner. It was then that they both knew that their love had survived and was meant to be everlasting.

that it was exactly the time she had asked Pete Hobson to call upon her. She smiled. She knew he would not be late. Then she wondered what the precise reason was for her urgent call to Pete, the call she had made from her own room only minutes after her mother's announcement. She had felt a frantic urge to have Pete with her, to be alone with him until it was time for Judy Corbin to visit in the evening. Lithe thought about it, felt again the same urgency, the same desire, and, though her reasons were still unclear she knew that she would soon know her true reason for seeing Pete, that she would know what she wanted from him. She was about to turn from the window when she saw Pete's old car come into view. She watched as it jolted to a halt in front of the house.

Lithe smiled again and remained very quiet as a new thought came to her, a thought that clearly indicated the previously hidden reasons for her wish to be with Pete Hobson. It was all very clear to her now. Very clear. She was glad. She had needed Pete in order to fulfill her demon desire for revenge on all of the world but especially on Mark Corbin.

When Pete bounded lightly up the front stairs Lithe turned from the window and hurried to the door. She opened it and smiled a bright welcome.

"Wow," Pete exclaimed, entering the house. "Do you greet all of your visitors dressed like that?"

"Only you, darling, only you."

Pete gulped and glanced at Lithe's bare legs.

"Come on, Pete boy," Lithe said. "I want to see you—really *need* you, to be perfectly honest." She grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the foot of the stairs.

Pete pulled back and placed both hands on his hips as he eyed her suspiciously. "You been drinking or something?"

"No, precious. We'll save that for later. . . . gets here."

"Judy?"

"She's coming over this evening." She paused, then laughed in a flutter that seemed ~~unusual~~ and of a quality other than merriment. "She's coming over to do homework." Lithe's laugh continued, higher and more shrill, as if on the brink of a secret hysteria.

"What in the hell are you up to?" Pete asked skeptically.

Lithe moved closer to him and put her hands at the back of his neck and gently caressed his skin. "I'm up to you, darling. After all this time—after weeks of teasing, Pete precious, I'm up to you—for you—can't resist you very much longer." Although her mouth had gone trembly-anxious the words had the tone of contrivance.

But their content hid it from Pete. He pulled her close. "You kiddin'?"

She pushed herself tightly against him, forced her hips to his then caught his lips with hers and shot her tongue, strong and hot, to the deepest reaches of his mouth. She pulled away just as he caught her buttocks with his hands and jerked her closer.

"Do you think I'm kidding?" she asked with a little laugh.

"I don't care if you are," he answered huskily, reaching to grab her again.

She scooted away and caught his hand. "No—no, darling, not here. Upstairs—let's go upstairs."

She pulled on his hand and led him to the stairway. Pete did not answer. He merely hurried ~~after her~~ ^{up} her bouncing hips as they rushed to the top of the stairs.

As soon as they entered her bedroom Lithe went to the bed, turned and faced Pete, then quickly fell to her back with her arms outstretched and waiting.

Pete did not immediately go to her. He stood at the edge of the bed and looked down, one eye cocked in an arch of disbelief.

"Come to me, Pete," Lithe said. "Come and hold me."

His look of doubt faded and he went to her in a plunge that shook the bed.

Immediately, Lithe plastered her body to Pete and jammed her thighs hard against his body. She accepted his mouth, his plunging tongue and made it hers to nibble, caress and suck in a feigned panic of gasping passion. And, as she felt the boy's body grow tense and desperate she wondered about herself, how it was possible for her to create so much wanting in another while her mind dwelled on hate, on Mark Corbin, on Judy and Claudia and on all those who had converged upon her.

Pete grabbed at one breast, felt it, then hooked his fingers within her robe to feel all of the fleshiness of both breasts. Lithe permitted his manipulations for a few seconds, then turned quickly and pushed his hand away.

"Not yet, Pete," she gasped. "Go slow, baby. Real slow. Don't excite me too soon." She paused, then said, "A man goes slow, Petey—you know that—you're a man, aren't you?"

"I'm a man," he mumbled. He jammed himself closer to her, burrowed, then pushed harder for a moment before she twisted her body to the side.

"Slowly, I said," Lithe whispered. Then, as if to apologize for the caution, she whipped her tongue into his ear before withdrawing it in order to nibble at its lobe with sharp, little bites.

Pete moaned deliriously and scrambled in a fury of attempt to gain dominion over her body.

But Lithe rolled to the side then jumped away

from the bed as Pete floundered in the bedspread.

He raised and looked at her.

She smiled at him and slowly brought her hands to the belt of her robe. She undid it. Slowly, she parted the robe at her shoulders, held the half-bare pose for a second, then let it drop to the floor.

Pete pushed to the edge of the bed, his hands shooting out like frantic hooks.

"Slow, baby," Lithe advised. "Slow and good. Here. Let me help you. You get naked, too, Pete, darling. We've never known your body bare."

She pulled at his shoulders until he rose from the bed and stood next to her. Then she worked at the buttons of his shirt, parted it and ran her hands over his bare chest.

"Oh, you've got a nice body, Pete. Nice and hard. I didn't know you were so hard and strong, Pete. Really, I didn't."

She made her fingers work fast at his belt until his joined hers and together they shook him free of all his clothing. Lithe brought a gasp of satisfaction to her own. "Oh, Pete—I had no idea how—how strong you were. You're a real man, Pete."

Proudly, he stood in front of Lithe as she pressured at his shoulders, felt at his ribs and waist then brought her hands to the small of his back where she gently rubbed.

A look of unbearable patience played in Pete's eyes. Then it vanished as he grabbed Lithe's naked body against his and she burrowed and shoved all of her body against all of his.

Finally, breathlessly, she pushed away from him and fell to the bed again.

Words choked unborn in Pete's throat, his body trembled, shook, then convulsed as he lowered himself to the bareness of Lithe. She looked into his eyes,

arched her body, waited, felt him fumble, then c and fumble again. Quietly, she brought one hand to the back of his neck. She heard his crying, shallow sigh of first realization, then, as he began his downward ascent Lithe twisted suddenly to her side and away from his body as he crashed, body-whipping the bed.

Instantly, she was on her feet and looking down at the confused and angry boy. She smiled wickedly.

He scrambled to the bed's edge and was about to leap to retake her when she moved close, pushed his shoulders, restraining him and, oddly, at the same time restoring some quiet to his twitching body.

"Slowly, Pete. I said, to be slow and easy."

His shoulders began to shake. "Slow? Geezus, what can I do, how much do I have to stand?" His body quivered again.

She brought his face to her bare breasts and stroked his head. Instead of exciting new passion, the action was meant to soothe and calm him. It did for a moment that it took Lithe to say, "You'll have me soon, Pete. Very soon. You'll have me tomorrow I promise, but you have to do something for me first."

His body tensed again. "What? You've been playing this game with me too long—I can't stand it another minute."

"You'll have to stand it for a little while yet," she said. "Maybe an hour or so. Just until Judy gets here."

He pulled his head back and looked up at her. "What does she have to do with this?"

"Everything, Pete. Just everything." She paused and thought of everything Judy Corbin had that she did not possess, that she could never again have even try to claim. Then she said, "Pete, I want you to make love to Judy."

He pulled further back. "You're crazy. Judy, doesn't go for this stuff—you know that. I'd get my eyes clawed out."

"Not if you're man enough to have me," she said quickly. "Not if you really want me."

"I do."

"Then you prove it to me. You get Judy. You get her when she comes here tonight."

His body sagged, his head lowered. He did not answer.

"Besides, Pete, it'll be very nice for you. Judy's never had a boy. Just think what you'll be getting."

Slowly, he shook his head and said, "You're crazy. Why do you want this—why should I make Judy because you want it?"

Her chin tilted high. An extremely covetous look came to her face and she said, "Because Judy Corbin shouldn't have anything that I don't have. At least his—at least there's something she has that you can take away from her for me."

Pete dragged to his feet. He looked down at Lithe and she knew that he had decided that this was the only way he would ever have her—that he could not forcefully make love to her, that Judy Corbin was his only entree.

"And if I do this—if I get Judy—you'll stop this damn teasing?"

"Oh, yes, Pete. Really, I will. As soon as you're ready for me, Pete. Tomorrow. Do this for me and we'll have tomorrow and maybe many tomorrows. And I'll be better for you than you can imagine—better than anything you've even dreamed of, Pete. Really, you have no idea."

His eyes glowed. He stepped back and looked at all of her naked body and felt his own react anew. Lithe

knew that he was visualizing the end to the beginning she had permitted.

"All right," he said smiling.

The single lamp in the living room beamed like a spotlight, stretching and widening its yellow glow over the couch, the cocktail table and the record player that was throbbing softly. The light missed the figure of Lithe sitting in a large chair to one side. It caught part of the shadowed outlines of Judy Corbin and Pete Hobson on the large couch.

As one soft record ended and another clicked into place, Lithe stood up and walked over to the cocktail table. She stooped and picked up a bottle that had been resting on the floor and poured a bit of its liquid into each of the glasses. Then she stood up and smiled at Judy and Pete.

"Fresh drinks for the couple," she said cheerfully.

Wearily, Judy said, "I thought Ron was coming over."

"I thought so, too," Lithe answered. "But, who knows."

"And we still haven't done our homework," Judy complained, her voice thick and sleepy and slightly liquor slurred.

Lithe bent at the waist and said, "No, honey, we haven't. But, why worry about it with graduation here."

"Sure," Pete agreed. He slipped his arm around Judy's shoulder to comfort her and she nestled her head against it and closed her eyes.

Pointedly, Lithe looked at Pete. Then she said, "Excuse me for a few minutes." She paused, then looked at Pete again. "You *will* excuse me, won't you?"

"We will," he answered, and snuggled Judy a little closer to him.

Lithe raised her glass in a mock salute then walked out of the room. In the foyer she turned and looked back to the living room. Then she slowly ascended the stairs.

It was dark in her bedroom. For a few minutes she stood quietly, feeling the darkness about her and in a way becoming part of it and she wondered why it was that darkness seemed always to command quiet. When she flicked on the light switch Lithe put her glass on the small telephone table by the bed then walked back to the door. She waited, then carefully moved to the head of the stairs. She leaned forward and listened, hoping for some sound indicating Pete's progress with Judy. Lithe heard nothing. She waited another few minutes and was rewarded with the muffled sound of Judy's voice. Even from such a distance and though the words were garbled, Lithe sensed that they were a plea.

She smiled and returned to the bedroom. At the bed she sat down and picked up her glass. She raised it and swallowed a small portion of the liquor, made strong by the recent addition. The warmth struck her stomach and because it was remindful of another, stronger warmth—the warmth that was gone from her life—she felt sad.

But sadness needed defense and defense was made more eager by revenge, so, she smiled, thinking of Judy Corbin on the couch in the room below. She glanced at the telephone and her smile grew wider. She waited, thought she heard another sound from the living room, then picked up the telephone and dialed the number of the Corbin home. She heard the first ring of the phone and felt pleased with herself that

tom of the stairs. She faced the living room entrance. She stood very still, the glass held, but forgotten in one hand.

Now Judy's cry was easily heard. Lithe listened, thinking how pitiful it was.

"No, no, no!" she heard Judy cry. Then, "Oh, no—please, stop it!"

Judy's voice choked, then muffled, then there was a cry, silence, then a new, pleading call.

"Lithe—Lithe, help me, help me, Lithe," Judy cried. "Make him—stop him, Lithe—"

Lithe trembled as her name was called. She thought of all the times Judy had called to her, lilting and happy and in friendship.

Judy screamed.

Lithe took a step forward then stopped.

Judy shrieked, terrifyingly shrill and painful.

Lithe shuddered. Her body tensed. Her hands clutched into fists and she heard the glass break, then felt the sticky warmth of blood.

There was no new cry from Judy, only body shaking sobs. Lithe stared transfixed at the living room entrance, then, very slowly, she raised her cut hand before her face and watched the blood first trickle, grow thicker, ooze, then streak down her wrist and arm.

She did not hear Judy enter the foyer. She did not notice her bent-over position of hurt and despair or the way her hand knotted and held her skirt and bunched it high at her thighs. Lithe merely stared at her own bleeding hand; sad, sad symbol of shame and guilt.

Judy limped to the door, then turned and stared at Lithe.

"You—you did this to r

"You—no one but you. Stop

to this. And I don't know why." She paused and painfully clutched one hand on the doorknob.

Only Lithe's eyes moved. They went wide with confusion and disbelief for Judy's words, as if nothing should have been changed between them.

Judy turned the doorknob and tugged hard for it to open. Then she sobbed, "Why? Why did you do this—why did you take this from me—the one thing I was saving for the day I'd know love. You took it from me. So—stand there and bleed for me because I hate you—hate you—hate you."

Judy's face contorted and she doubled over with a new stab of pain. She waited while it lessened, then she pulled again on the door and walked slowly into the darkness of the night. It was not until she felt a slight breeze from the open door that Lithe broke her forlorn pose. Then all she did was drop her bleeding hand, knowing that it dripped on the carpet, smeared at her skirt and smudged, now and forever, everything around her. But she did not care.

And, Lithe did not find anything new to care about when a little later Pete appeared at the foyer, smiling luridly and expectantly while his eyes wandered over all of her body, viewing possessively the prize that he had won.

Lithe looked at him then turned away to again look at the open door, the darkness and emptiness of the night into which Judy had disappeared.



of pain? He shook his head in bewilderment for his own phantasy then walked back to the desk and picked up the phone.

Claudia's voice was working very hard at calmness, and, by that very effort brought even greater anxiety to Mark. "Darling—I'm so glad you're home. I was early ready to hang up—now darling, it's not too serious but Judy's—well, she's been hurt. Not badly now, so don't get excited. She's really quite all right. She came over to my place. I've already had her to the doctor's and she'll be just fine—I waited until now to tell you—until after the doctor—but, I thought you'd better know and—"

"I'll be right over," Mark interrupted worriedly. Then, as if it would clarify the shock, he asked, "What is it?"

"About ten."

He hung up without another word. He walked rapidly out of the room. He did not look back. He did not bother to switch off lights or try the door after he slammed it shut behind him. He dashed for his car in the driveway, jumped in, turned the ignition, roared the motor and shot out of the drive.

When he turned onto the road that led to Claudia's house, Mark wondered why he had not asked what it was that had happened to his daughter. It seemed to be the first logical question, yet he had not inquired. Why? Could it be that the answer would be too terrible for him to bear alone? That he had avoided knowledge of his daughter's condition because of its horror? He did not know. Yet, as he considered it, he used that whatever he found at Claudia's—whatever the condition of Judy—its cause would have to be like the Sutton. And he felt completely helpless. There was no revenge of his own, no attack or fight that he could assert against a seventeen-year-old girl.

Without announcing his arrival, Mark pushed open the front door and stepped inside. Claudia was coming down the stairs. Mark closed the door behind him and waited.

She came to him immediately. "Now, darling, just as I told you on the phone, she's all right. She's resting upstairs."

"What happened—what happened to Jude? Stop this prancing around and tell me what in hell happened?"

For a moment Claudia glanced away from his eyes. Then she looked at him. "Judy was raped, Mark. Not really that—seduced, I guess—had relations with a boy against her will."

His stomach knotted. A burn scorched within his chest. He felt it burn hotter then come to his throat. He felt perspiration form and bubble on his brow as wave after wave of nausea flooded him.

"But she is all right, Mark," Claudia offered very fast. "Doctor Kleffman treated her. Other than being very upset she's—"

"Who?" Mark blurted. "Tell me who."

"It doesn't matter, Mark. Judy said it ~~didn't~~ matter."

"Goddamn it, who?"

"I don't know. Judy wouldn't say." ~~Claudia~~ ~~then~~ then said, "It seems there was a great ~~deal more to it~~ than just a boy."

he moment at least, who it was who had physically brought this to Judy, truly did not matter.

"Come, let's sit down for a few minutes," Claudia said.

"I want to see Jude," Mark said.

"You can, darling. But let her rest for another few minutes."

Mark allowed Claudia to lead him into the study. He felt very old, very tired.

Once settled on the couch with Claudia close beside him, Mark listened to the whole story very quietly. And, although there were no outward signs to disclose the upheaval that he felt deep within him, he felt its growing effect with each new word of the gruesome tale.

When Claudia finished Mark felt thoroughly limp. The anger was gone. So was the nausea. He felt only exhaustion and thought that it would now always be a part of him. Thousands of thoughts formed in his mind and quickly died. Only one remained clear and constant.

"I have to tell Judy," Mark said.

"Tell her what?" Claudia asked.

He hesitated, then said, "About Lithe—about Lithe and me—about the part I've played in this."

Claudia took his hand in hers and said, "No, darling. I don't think you should. Judy doesn't know a thing about it—if she did, I'd surely know by now—she told me everything. Don't tell her, Mark."

"I have to."

"But—it's not necessary. I just heard today that Lithe and her mother are leaving town. Telling Judy now—well, it could be worse than what's already happened to her, put her right in the midst of that horrible depression again. It could ruin her."

Mark arose. "I have to take that chance, Claudia. Claudia rose, too. "But at least not now, darling. Wait a little while."

"No. I've waited too long already. I'm afraid Claudia. Just as afraid for Judy as you are. But I have to tell her now." He paused and rubbed his chin with one hand for a few seconds. Then he said, "You know Judy and I have always gotten along famously—much better than most fathers and daughters. Much better. We've always had a very genuine love and respect for each other. And we've enjoyed each other. But lately—well, there's been a real distance between us. I've felt it. Maybe Judy has, too. But—I couldn't—maybe wouldn't really recognize it. Now I have to. If ever we're to be the same again, well, I just have to take a chance on love—as I did with you—take a chance and hope that everything will be all right again some day."

Claudia's eyes filled with tears. She looked at Mark a moment, then went to him and kissed him gently on the cheek.

"Judy's in my bedroom," she said.

Mark nodded and walked away from her.

Each step of the stairs seemed a mountain to be accomplished as Mark slowly moved upward and ever closer to his child. He paused at the partially closed door. Then he breathed deeply and entered the room. Judy was sitting up in bed, propped high against pillows stacked at the headboard. A single light, dimly turned to shine away from the bed was on a table a few feet to one side. It cast a half-veiled light across Judy's face.

When Mark looked closely at his daughter he felt a moment's shock, then a sudden wave of happiness. He was waking from a nightmare and finding that—

only that. Judy's face was unscarred, without the signs of abuse he had expected. It seemed impossible that there should be no visible evidence of inner ravishment.

But when Judy spoke, Mark thought again about unseen scars that had been brought to her life. Her voice was low and shy and he wondered if it was this that was meant to be her lifelong badge of injury.

"Hi, Dad," she said. A thin smile peeked, then faded.

Mark crossed the room, bent at the bed and kissed his daughter lightly on the forehead. Then he stepped back.

"You all right?" he asked.

"I'm all right."

"Sure?"

"Very sure."

"I'm—I'm sorry, honey."

"Try not—try not to think about it, Dad. I'm trying not to."

Carefully, he sat on the edge of the bed, turning his body in a position to face her. He took both her hands in his and held them gently.

They were both very silent for what seemed like a very long time. And Mark wished that the spell might never be broken, that he might be allowed to continue in this captured closeness with his child forever, that he might be spared from speaking and shattering all that he knew they shared at that very moment.

Finally, and regretfully, Mark said, "There's no end to the story, Jude."

"What story, Dad?"

"Yours—ours—Lithe's—Lithe's and mine."

Her eyes grew troubled. "Lithe's—and yours?"

"Yes." He paused, started to speak then paused

again before saying, "Lithe and I have been having an affair, Judy. It's because of that that this happened to you, because I—"

"An affair!" she exclaimed. Her body grew rigid.

"Yes."

"You and Lithe—an affair. You've made love to Lithe—my father made love to a girl friend of mine—a schoolgirl?"

"Yes," Mark said again.

Judy withdrew her hands from Mark and moved higher on her pillows.

"Judy—Judy, just listen to me a minute. It's all very—very sick and rotten and it's my fault even more than—than Lithe's—"

"You and Lithe," she cried, a tearing sob breaking the shell of her words.

"Yes, Judy. I'm sorry, but, yes."

Abruptly, Judy turned her head to the side, straining hard and away from her father.

"Jude—"

"Please, please," she cried. "Just leave me alone—just leave me alone, please."

The bed creaked mournfully as he rose to his feet. He looked down at Judy and saw that her eyes were shut tightly, as if once again she wanted to black out reality, all of the hurt and sorrow of it. Her body trembled as if from a chill and the sheets rippled from her new, chest-choked sobbing. Her face had darkened and instant furrows of gray despair etched hollows beneath her eyes.

Mark knew well the cloud that had so quickly transfigured his daughter's face. It was a new sister to the sorrow and pain, the mother-loss of the past. It was emotional illness come close again and made stronger and more fearsome by his own betrayal of love, of

Chapter Fifteen

Lithe stopped in the middle of the front lawn sidewalk and looked at the bold, red real estate sign. She smiled bitterly, thinking how it had the effect of already making the house look empty. And *she* felt empty, too. But, at least it was an emptiness that *was* familiar, she thought, a pattern very well established in her life.

She continued up the walk to the front door of her house. She paused and looked back at the sign again and thought that emptiness *was* the same as loneliness. Then, as if she needed a symbol for her own loneliness, she raised her hand and looked at the wide strip of tape that bisected her palm from forefinger to wrist. Then she dropped it to her side and continued into the house.

then she clamped her teeth down hard in a murderous snap of hate. She was surprised that there was no instant cry from Pete—no frantic movement to be free. But when she bit harder and tasted blood, there was a desperate cry, a shuffle from his body and another terrible cry of pain as he fought to break the vice-like grip of her teeth.

Then she bit even harder.

When Pete cried again and his body moved back, Lithe unclamped her teeth. Then she pushed hard against his shoulders and leaped to her feet.

Pete sprawled backward to the floor and Lithe could see a jagged streak of blood trickling from each corner of his mouth. She dashed for the door and had nearly reached it when Pete rolled to his side, lunged, and caught her ankle. He twisted, then as she fell he grasped at her skirt and pulled hard. There was the shriek of ripping cloth as it tore away from her body.

Lithe rolled as she saw Pete rise and throw himself at her again. He landed at the space of floor she had held. But there was no escaping his arms. He gathered her to him and pulled himself to his knees above her.

Lithe had an instant vision of what the struggle with Judy must have been like, and she knew that from it, Pete had gained strength and confidence and new lustful desires.

Pete locked her to the floor, pinning her at the waist with his knees. When she twisted her body hard to shake him loose, he raised his hand high and slapped her hard again across the face.

"Bitch," he steamed. "Rotten bitch—why should a slut like you be so goddamn hard to get?"

Lithe wondered at his question just before she struck him madly with her fist.

Pete gasped, doubled over and half collapsed on Lithe. She rolled again and was clear of his body.

But only for an instant. Pete leaped from his position on the floor like a mad and hurt animal seeking escape. He caught her sweater with his fingers. It ripped, parted, then came away from her breasts as Lithe streaked away from the clutching hand and dashed for the living room.

Pete hit her at the waist with a football tackle. They crashed to the floor together. He pushed above her just as Lithe raised her head. Brutally, he crashed his fist against her cheekbone. Her head snapped back and hit the floor with a sick thud.

The present darkened and leaped out of reach. Then, montage-like, it changed and became parts of the past and of the future.

Pete's hands worked furiously as Lithe felt her slip being ripped from her body, then the slight chill that came to her nudity. Then the chill was gone, subdued by the hot hands again on her flesh and the rough material of Pete's jeans scraping against her skin. Her mind cleared. Vision—and the present—came to her quickly as if she were denied even the comfort of unconsciousness.

Pete was above her. She saw his face looking down. Then she felt the working hands pulling at her breasts, and the pain increased with each new touch. But Lithe did not cry, or sob, or plead. She merely looked through the pain as Pete's expression changed and grew more menacing, as if the action of his hands had created a new desire.

"Bite me, will you," he croaked. Then he bent, clamped his mouth to one breast and bit with savage fury as growls sputtered from his throat and his head shook hard with his weighty, tearing effort.

Still, Lithe did not scream. She did not again clamor to be free. She felt the pain, endured it, thought

dered at how quickly hurt and shame dissolved lifetime's happiness of father and child.

Abruptly, he swung his chair forward and dropped his hands on the desk top. He inhaled deeply on his cigarette, coughed and felt the bad taste of a sleepless night's smoking. Slowly, he rubbed one hand over his chin. He felt the sharp, whisker bristles and considered a shower and shave. Then he rejected the notion. He was too tired for even an attempt at refreshing himself. He looked at the telephone again, then almost as if he had willed its call, it rang. Quickly, he picked it up and heard Claudia's voice, sleepy and apprehensive.

"I knew you'd be awake," she said. There was a pause, then, "Is Judy there?"

"Of course she isn't here," he said. "Why? What happened? Where in the devil is she?"

Mark could hear the catch in Claudia's voice as she said, "I don't know. Oh, my god, I don't know Mark!"

"Stop and think now," he said, surprised that his voice was calm even as his stomach convulsed with instant worry.

"I am thinking," Claudia said, nearly screaming.

"When did you last see her?"

"When I went to bed. Shortly after you left."

"How was she then?"

"The same. Quiet, thoughtful, not very talkative. I talked to her a lot, Mark. I've tried to explain everything. But she hasn't given me any sign of her feelings. None at all. That's what frightened me—so when I looked in her room and found her gone, I thought she had gone home to you."

Mark was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "I'll come right over. Geezus, I don't know what to do. I'll come over and we'll start from there."

"Maybe we should just wait, Mark."

"For what? We can't." He paused and felt clammy sweat at his back. Then he asked, "How—how despondent was she, Claudia?"

"I can't say, Mark. I really don't know."

Fearfully, he said, "You don't think—she wouldn't—do you think she'd hurt herself, Claudia? Do you think she'd—"

"Oh, god help me, I don't know," she said, beginning to sob.

"Stay there. I'll be right over. Then—then we can decide what to do."

"All right, darling. All right," Claudia cried. Mark had the impression that she was extremely close to hysteria.

He forced confidence into his tone, and said, "Take it easy. She'll be all right. We'll find her." He replaced the phone and stared at it for a moment. Then he hurried out of the study.

In his bedroom he quickly threw off his bathrobe, pajamas and slippers. Even more quickly he pulled on slacks, a shirt and sweater. Effortfully calm, he walked into the hall and paused. He looked to the end room. For a moment he thought he heard a sound coming from it, then he realized that his mind was only reconstructing every early morning scene of his life with Judy: his early rising, the pause in the hall to hear his daughter's light breathing or restless turn in her sleep, then the walk down the hall to glance in for a moment and smile at the tossed head softly at rest on the pillow.

Mark turned and walked toward the stairs. Then he paused again, turned back and walked to Judy's room.

Silently, he pushed open the door. The room was very dark. Mark waited, then walked over to the bed. Its neatness—and emptiness—screamed at him. As if

fleeing all the unhappiness of his life he turned and rushed out of the room.

Mark had reached the front door when he searched his hip pocket for his keys then cursed for having forgotten them. He hurried back to the study, snatched them from the desk, then walked to the foyer again and out the door.

Outside, he breathed deeply, catching all the light fragrance of early summer yet feeling no joy for it. He exhaled, then trotted toward his car parked midway in the drive. It was when he opened the door and turned slightly to ease his body into the front seat that he looked far down the driveway. It was then that he saw the figure at the front of the lawn.

He straightened and looked again, peering intently through the morning's last layers of mist. He recognized the figure as Judy as she came walking toward him across the lawn and through the mist.

"Jude!" he shouted.

"Dad—oh, Dad," Judy cried. She hesitated, then ran swiftly toward her father.

Mark reached her in the middle of the lawn. He opened his arms as Judy ran the final few steps to the comfort of his embrace. He clutched her to him, held her tightly, felt and heard her sobs and was happy for them, knowing that they marked the end of despair and confusion—the end of sorrow and the final defeat of sickness.

"Oh, Dad—Daddy, I'm sorry," she cried.

"No, no, no—I'm sorry, Jude, I'm sorry."

"Oh, Daddy—I thought and thought and everything was so confused and unhappy—so—insane. But Daddy—I understand, I know how things can happen—especially with a girl like—well, I know what can happen, really I do. Please forgive me, Daddy. I just had to come to you right away, I just—"

He stopped her flow of words by holding her tighter. "Let's not talk about it any more. Let's just forget everything."

"Oh, yes," she said.

Finally, when Judy's sobs had stopped and Mark had gathered the full happiness of their reunion to his heart, they turned toward their home and discovered that the last mist that had surrounded them was gone.

When the last strains of *Pomp and Circumstance* faded and all of the graduates were lined up and waiting at the side of the stage, Mark Corbin reached next to him and grasped Claudia's hand. She responded with a loving pressure from her fingers.

Mark smiled and continued to keep his eyes fixed on the figure of his daughter. She waited, calmly, and smiling slightly as each of the graduates in front of her took their turn walking alone across the stage to receive their diploma from the school principal.

Soon, only three youngsters were in front of Judy. Then there were two. And finally, only one. Then Judy's name was announced. She hesitated a moment, then walked onto the stage.

And, if Mark felt that moment's hesitation—knew it as sadness for the empty space that had been meant for one who was gone—it vanished as his daughter walked across the stage and the applause rose high.

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